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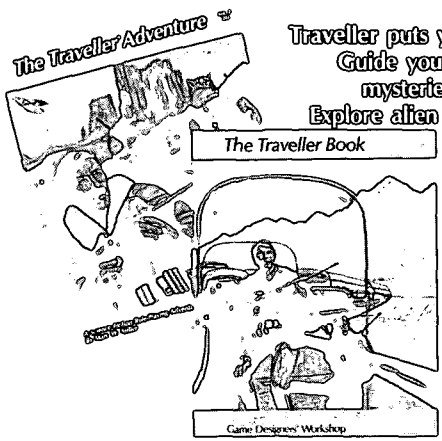

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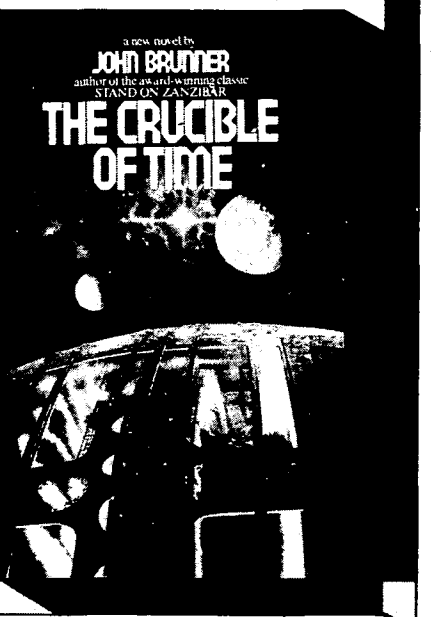

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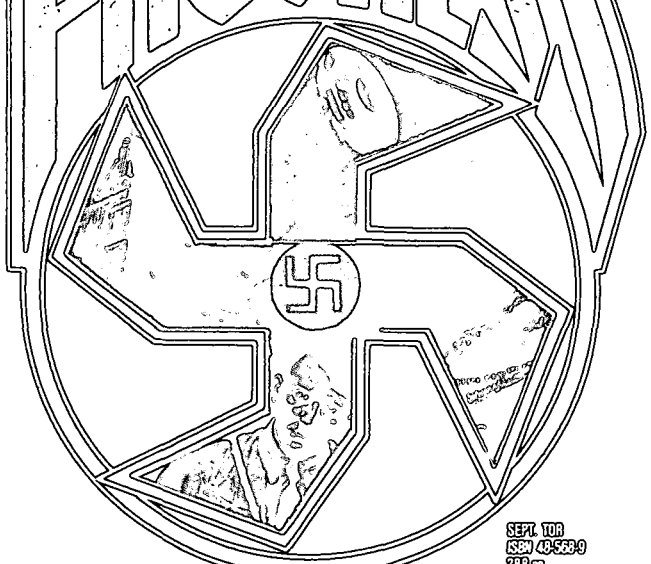

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Isaac ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

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EDITORIAL

NOWHERE!

by Isaac Asimov

In 1516, the English scholar Thomas More (1478–1535) published a book (in Latin), with a long title—as was the fashion in those days—that was also in Latin. When it finally appeared in its first English edition in 1551, the title was given as "A fruteful and pleasaunt Worke of the beste State of a publyque Weale, and of the newe yle, called Utopia." We refer to the book simply as *Utopia*.

In the book, More described the workings of what he considered an ideal human society, as found on the island nation of Utopia, one that was governed entirely by the dictates of reason. His description of such a society is *so* noble and rational that it would seem enviable even today.

More was under no illusions as to the real world, however. The word "Utopia" is from the Greek "ou" ("not") and "topos" ("place") so that it means "Nowhere." More realized, in other words, that his ideal existed nowhere on Earth (and still doesn't). In fact, his book, in describing his ideal society, served also by clear contrast to excoriate the actual governments of his day, particularly that of his native England which, of course, he knew the best.

An easy mistake was made, however. Since Utopia, as described, was such a wonderful place, it could easily be imagined that the first syllable was from the Greek prefix "eu-" meaning "good" so that Utopia became not "nowhere" but the "good place."

The word "utopia" entered the English language, and the other European languages as well, as an ideal society. The adjective "utopian" refers to any scheme that has what seems a good end in view, but that is not practical, and cannot be carried through in any realistic sense.

We might speak of utopian literature—written accounts in which ideal societies are described, with More's as the classic, but not the earliest, example. Plato's *Republic* was a description, nineteen centuries earlier than *Utopia*, of an ideal state

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dependent upon reason. Earlier still, were accounts of ideal states in mythological or religious literature, in the form of past Golden Ages or of future Messianic ones. The Garden of Eden is a well-known example of the former, and the 11th Chapter of Isaiah of the latter.

The production of utopian accounts has not fallen off since the time of More, either. The most influential recent examples have been *Looking Backward*, published in 1888 by Edward Bellamy (1850–1898), which described the United States of 2000 under an ideal Socialist government, and *Walden Two*, published in 1948 by B. F. Skinner (1904–), which described an ideal society based on Skinner's own theories of social engineering.

All such Utopias are not convincing, however. Unless one accepts the conventions of religion, it is difficult to believe in golden or messianic ages. Nor can one easily suppose that sweet reason will at any time dominate humanity.

In the course of the 19th Century, however, something new entered the field of utopianism. The possibility arose that scientific and technological advance might impose a Utopia from without, so to speak. In other words, while human beings remained as irrational and imperfect as ever, the advance of science might supply plenty of food, cure disease and mental ailments, track down and abort irrational impulses, and so on. A perfect technology would cancel out an imperfect humanity. The tendency to take this attitude and to paint the future in glowing technological colors reached the point where what we call science fiction is called, in Germany, "utopian stories."

As a matter of fact, however, it isn't at all likely that the average writer is going to try to write a truly utopian story. There's no percentage in it. All you can do is describe such a society and explain, at great length, how good it is, and how well it works, and how it manages not to break down. There can't be any drama in it, no problems, no risks, no threat of catastrophe, no pulling through by the merest squeak. Clearly, if such things were possible, the Utopia would be no Utopia. It follows that utopian stories are, by their very nature, dreadfully dull. The one utopian novel I've actually managed to read was *Looking Backward*, and although it was a best-seller in its times and still has its enthusiasts, I tell you right now that if dullness could kill, reading it would be a death sentence.

So dull are utopian books that they fail to fulfil their function of pointing out the errors and faults of the societies

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that really exist. You can't grow indignant over these faults if you fall asleep in the process.

There developed, therefore, the habit of attacking societies in a more direct fashion. Instead of describing the good opposite, one described the evil reality, but exaggerated it past bearing. Instead of a society in which everything was ideally good, one described a society in which everything was ideally bad.

The word coined for a totally bad society is "dystopia," where the first syllable is from the Greek prefix "dys-" meaning "abnormal" or "defective." Dystopia is the "bad place." Thus, you can figure out what "dystopian literature" would be.

Dystopias are intrinsically more interesting than Utopias. Milton's description of his dystopian Hell in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* is far more interesting than his description of utopian Hell in the third book. And in *The Lord of the Rings*, not much can be told about the stay of the Fellowship in the utopian elfland of Lorien, but how the story intensifies and grows more interesting as we approach the dystopian Morder.

But can there be dystopias today with science and technology advancing as they do?

Certainly! You need only view science and technology as *con-*

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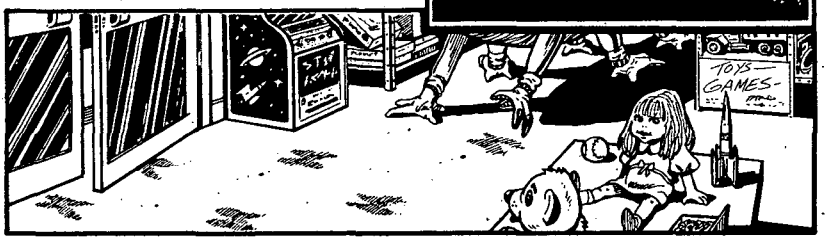

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tributing to the evil (which is not difficult to do).

And yet *pure* dystopian tales are as dull and as unbearable as pure utopian ones. Consider the most famous pure dystopian tale of modern times, *1984* by George Orwell (1903–1950), published in 1948 (the same year in which *Walden Two* was published). I consider it an abominably poor book. It made a big hit (in my opinion) only because it rode the tidal wave of cold war sentiment in the United States.

The pure utopian tale can only hit the single note of "Isn't it wonderful—wonderful—wonderful—." The pure dystopian tale can only hit the single note of "Isn't it awful—awful—awful—." And one cannot build a melody on the basis of a single note.

Well, then, what is a science fiction writer supposed to do if both utopian and dystopian stories are dull?

Remember, they are poor only if they are pure, so avoid the extremes. Milton's Hell was made interesting because of his portrait of Satan, courageous even in the ultimate adversity, feeling pangs of remorse even when immersed in ultimate evil. Milton's Heaven was without interest because there was no way of introducing danger in the face of an omnipotent, omniscient God. His dystopia was not pure, his utopia was.

The evil of Mordor was made bearable by the courage and humanity of Frodo and the story would have remained interesting and successful even if Frodo had failed in the end. It was his courage and humanity, not his victory, that really counted.

The essence of a story is the struggle of one thing against another: a living thing against the impersonal Universe; a living thing against another living thing; one aspect of a living thing against another aspect of himself.

In each case, you have to make it possible for the reader to identify with at least one side of the struggle, so that his interest and sympathy is engaged. I say "at least" one side, because if you are skillful, you can cause him to identify with both sides and be emotionally torn.

The side or sides with whom you identify must carry on the struggle with courage, intelligence, and decency—or, at least, learn to do so. The story won't be effective if you are ashamed of the side you make your own.

Both sides must have a fair chance to win. It is tempting to pile the odds up against your side, so as to make your hero's ultimate victory the more unexpected, exciting, and triumphant, but in that case you must be sure that your side *does* end up victorious. You can't make it David versus Goliath

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unless David wins, and as one becomes more and more experienced and sophisticated in reading, that may come to seem too obvious and even too unrealistic.

It seems to me, then, that the best one can do is to present one's story as a struggle between sides which are both mixtures of good and evil (thus placing it somewhere between the extremes of utopia and dystopia), and don't make the odds overwhelming in either direction. One can then proceed to make one's point without being *forced* into a happy ending and under conditions of maximum excitement and reader-uncertainty. The reader will not only be uncertain as to how his side will win, but *if* it will win, or even, perhaps, which is truly his side.

I don't say this is easy, of course. ●

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LETTERS

CORRECTION

In our May issue, we published "Belling Martha," a finely crafted and moving story by Leigh Kennedy. She was duly credited, and her name was spelled right, and everything was fine. . . . Until you got to the "blurb," the little paragraph of information which appears in the beginning of each story. In the blurb we said that her latest novel, "The Aventine" *was out from Del Rey Books. This is not true.* Aventine *(no* The*) is by Lee Killough, a talented lady in her own right, who doesn't collaborate with, hang around with, or even* live *near Leigh Kennedy. Both Leighs/Lees were understandably surprised when this misinformation appeared in print, and I apologize to both of them. Ms. Kennedy gamely suggested that one day she and Lee will have to have a party: Meet the Lee(igh)s Killennedough. I have a feeling that's one party I should attend.*

—Shawna McCarthy

Dear Sirs,

We are editing an anthology of contemporary English-writing authors, primarily for the use in Danish schools and extension courses (beginners, intermediate and advanced levels), and secondarily for students in the rest of Scandinavia. The anthology is part of a language project of which we have already published some of the grammatical/linguistic material (with an established Danish publisher's firm).

For our work with the anthology we need contacts with writers of short stories, poems, and articles. We should be happy if your magazine would be the intermediary of this contact at the initial stages, e.g. by telling your contributors/readers about our project—either in a note in the magazine, or in any other form that you find convenient.

Despite the relatively large number of readers for such an anthology, the immediate financial output is modest—to put it mildly; however, we intend to publish not only the biographies (and photographs if wanted) but also the bibliographies of our prospective contributors along with their texts. This should help the Scandinavian readers to find the authors' other works—and their magazines.

Ourselves? We are both employed in the KKF (Copenhagen Community Preparatory Schools—Intermediate & Advanced Levels), the largest school in Denmark—as teachers and student advisors. J. G. Rasmussen is also a member of The Danish Authors' Society.

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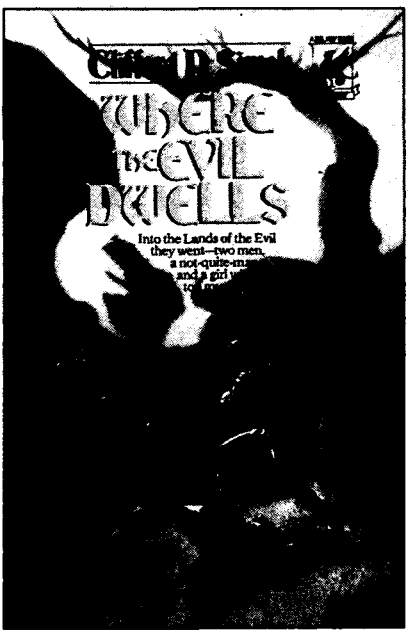

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Ms. McCarthy,

First, congratulations on your promotion to chief honcho at *IAsfm*. After all the times Doctor A has mentioned you in print, I'm sure that ten million readers—all of whom are aspiring writers—feel that a personal friend has moved into the catbird seat. Now all you have to do is choose which stories you'll publish from among those sent in by ten million personal friends! Second, my vote goes for more science fiction and less everything else (always excepting the Good Doctor's monthly editorial). I prefer to go to the *Times* for my crossword puzzles and to the library for my science. But of course you can't totally please everyone.

Finally, best wishes in your new role. Long may you reign.
Very truly yours,

Bill Burg
Citrus Heights, CA

One of my jobs as "Editorial Director" is to keep a steady eye on the Editor, and Shawna sure makes that particular job an easy one.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. SF and friends:

First I must advise that I have not missed an issue of *IAsfm* since starting to buy it at bookstores several years ago; this method is far superior to the gamble of subjecting such valuables to the Canadian post office. Now there is a small potpourri of items I would like to address.

A letter a while back objected to the presence of a ghost story ("Lirios") in *IAsfm*; there was a reply suggesting that many readers claim to be interested in SF not fantasy, and then go out and read fantasy. I believe both sides are correct, and further object to the presence of another pure fantasy in an SF magazine ("A Romance of the Equator"). Certainly many readers read both SF and fantasy—those who wish to read fantasy can find it in many other magazines, and those who wish to find both varieties in one magazine already have one well-known selection available. I do not mind a reasonable amount of fantasy when it is SF-oriented, and would not mind finding SF-oriented fantasies (as other SF-oriented kinds of stories) in an SF magazine. However, the two stories cited above are not SF-oriented; it is merely co-incidental that one of the authors is famous for writing SF.

On the other hand, I believe we should not object to the term "sci-fi" because it has two excellent uses. One valuable characteristic of this phrase is that it is used by people who know nothing about SF in order to warn us that they know about SF. This way, we do not have to waste time listening to them or worrying about whether to take them seriously. A second use of this term would be helpful for people who are serious about SF. Many monster movies and many pitiful attempts at SF movies could be re-

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ferred to as "sci-fi" even by us, to distinguish them from SF.

"Foundation's Edge" would merit a longer-than-usual review in the book review section, and the commentaries (once I overcame my initial objections to their inclusion and their format) were in fact interesting and could have been listed (with less filler) following the review. But to pay a bonus price for the December issue and get a plug for his new book and the very suspenseful cut-off point, and then to have to pay a second time for the same two chapters? I believe that is an abuse of the magazine. In retaliation, my research for the next and final item will be done at the library, instead of buying the particular work of Dr. A.'s which will need researching.

Yours sincerely,

Norman Diamond
Waterloo, Ontario

With respect to the excerpt of my book "Foundation's Edge" in the December 1982 issue, I tend to agree with you. (I was outvoted.) As you do your library research, be assured you have my blessing.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

It seems clear to me that if your editor and your publisher wish to publish more of your material you should accede to such requests as best you can. If the majority of readers who write to you also would like to read more of your fiction then the only problem areas remaining (as mentioned in your editorial) relate to your personal goals and your feelings of fairness towards other writers.

Only you can decide if expending the effort required to produce a good story every month or two fits into your own plans for a self-fulfilling and exemplary life. Do you want to write limericks for *Sexig*, articles for various magazines, books for Doubleday and stories for *Asimov's*? If so, and if time considerations allow, then you should.

I do not feel that other writers will fault you for taking some of the limited space available if your stories are well written and meet the requirements of your editor and publisher. Did you feel slighted when your stories were rejected to make room for stories by your idols at that time? Other writers might thank you for giving them an example of fine writing frequently enough that they may learn from you.

Perhaps consideration of your reaction to requests for more stories by J. O. Jeppson would shed some enlightenment on the ethics of this situation.

I would like to read, in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, more frequent stories by both yourself and by your charming wife.

Very truly yours,

David L. Garvey
P.O. Box 1055
Kalamazoo, MI 49005

Most of the letters responding to the February 1983 editorial have been very kind. I can't very well permit the publication of more than two or three, lest the wild rumors to the effect that I have a "giant ego" seem substantiated.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have a terrible backlog of reading so I have just started *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Anthology* Volume 5, 1982.

In your editorial you ask the readers what they think of the definition "Science fiction stories are extraordinary voyages into any of the infinite supply of conceivable futures."

This brought to mind one science fiction story that I have read that I do not feel fits this definition, in that it could have taken place a billion years ago as well as at present or in the future.

Now, I will grant you that one story cannot be used to destroy a definition of a wide field. But this was not an ordinary story. In fact, it was selected by the Science Fiction Writers of America as the best science fiction short story ever written.

Perhaps you should start rethinking your definition before night falls.

Yours truly,

Pete Tingley,
Sussex Corner,
New Brunswick

How about "Science Fiction stories are extraordinary voyages into any of the infinite supply of conceivable societies markedly different from our own?" That would cover "Nightfall" by wotzisname.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

I enjoy your magazine very much, as I have been a fan of the Good Doctor's for nearly ten years. I was not pleased to see that your cover of the February 1983 issue was anatomically incorrect. Bees have two pairs of wings, and the venation was not that of a bee. But I guess that it must be attributed to artistic license.

Sincerely,

Lawrence Hribar
Knoxville, TN

I'm so glad I'm not an artist. With my own inattention to visual details, I would undoubtedly draw a bee without wings altogether.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov & Shawna,

There is a point to this letter, so bear with me. Usually I do not read letter columns, but this month I made an exception in *Isaac Asimov's* case and found myself horrified.

Let me explain. As a struggling writer trying to "make it" (large dollop of unadulterated hint there) I have from time to time been absolutely dismayed while pondering the workings of the minds of editors. They have seemed to me to be a strange sort, unfathomable in their depths, and yet, although I have felt from time to time as though pinned to the floor, drawn and quartered by comments from these creatures, they usually do a good job with their respective magazines.

There are times I cannot understand, though, what difference there was between a story of mine that has been rejected and one that then appeared in a magazine that rejected said story. Occasionally I am bemused, often angry, but now I have another glimmer of under-

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standing to add to my store of knowledge about this curious life form.

In the letter column of your February 1983 issue I find a letter from a fan criticizing your October '82 issue. He states that this issue has some of the best stories he's ever read in it. He then goes on to be specific about which he liked. Unexpectedly, though, he turns on some of the best of that issue, cutting them to shreds with a dull butcher's cleaver! How is it possible for someone to like "Coffin Rider" and detest "Johnny Beercans?" "The Moon of Advanced Learning" was a very subtle story, I admit, one not accessible, I would imagine, to the dullwitted, but "Shadows From a Small Template" was surely one of the best pieces of emotional SF I have ever seen! I would have reversed my opinions and lauded those stories that had some substance rather than go after the "cute" ones this writer chose to praise!

From this I realize more what it is like to be an editor. An editor is a highly skilled reader who must weigh precariously the merits of a story against personal taste. The battle must be difficult and who can be sure of every issue? Some stories cry out loudly their quality and merit and of themselves demand acceptance. Others . . .

What disturbs me most about that fan letter is the fact that the truly thoughtful, evocative stories were the ones he denigrated. Those that went for the quick thrill—even "Coffin Rider," which I loved, falls into this category—are those he liked. Popcorn. I suppose it's the same in every category of fiction.

Now let me say something off that subject completely. I have just finished this February '83 issue. I would like to say that this is by far the finest issue of *Asimov's* I have ever read. The quality of the work in this issue is superior by far to any that has appeared in the magazine since I've been reading it. I found nothing to fault. The cover is beautiful and quite fitting to the story, although personally (my apologies, Doctor) I would have thought "Hardfought" to be the cover story. If Greg Bear's piece does not at least get nominated for something I'll burn my mss. and toss my typewriter out the window, for the future of SF is surely in danger!

Keep it up, Shawna! Even if you don't buy any of my stories I think you have started off on the excellent foot (which, in my experience, is not always the right foot; the two are not synonomous!).

And I promise to be a bit more understanding of all editors . . .

Cordially yours,

Mark W. Tiedemann
St. Louis, MO

Obviously, I'll let the beauteous Shawna answer this one. Go ahead, Shawna!

—Isaac Asimov

It's nice when someone out there realizes that editors are not arbitrary automatons from outer space. I'd like to clarify one point, though. Since an editor cannot expect everyone to like everything, I think that what she must do is select those stories which she *likes—she has no other arbiter of taste. Therefore, no matter what the other merits of a*

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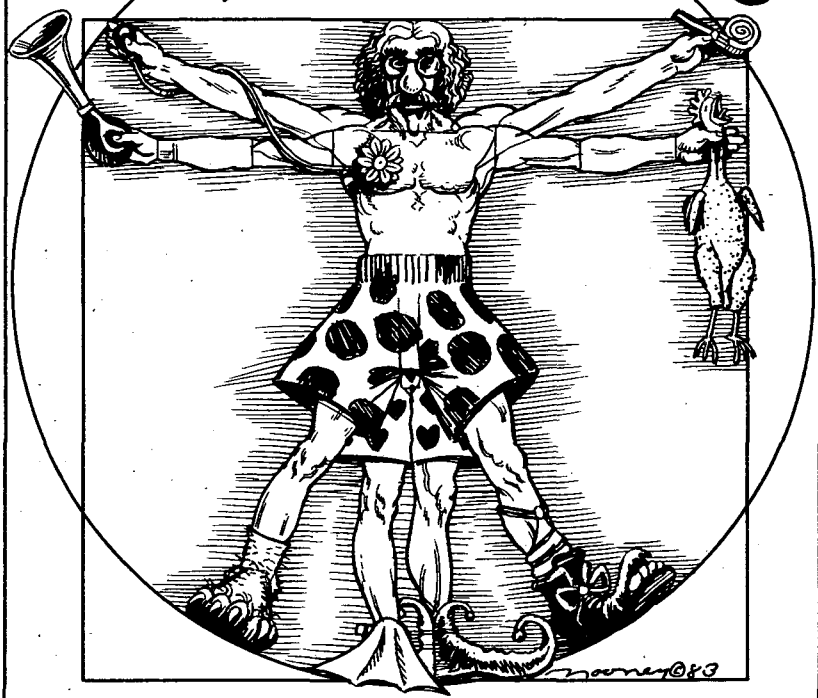
NBS REPORTS:

WHO PUT THE HUMOR IN HUMANITY?



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that lampoons the mirth-packed field of
scientific inquiry into mankind's humorous attitudes
towards scholarly research in that area, and
the failure of anyone to take it seriously.
Fred Flintstone, John Houseman, co-hosts.

8PM TONIGHT NBS-TV

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story, if it doesn't appeal to me, I won't buy it—I can't try to predict that such-and-such segment of the audience might like something even if I don't. The best I can hope for is that my taste matches the majority of the readers'.

—Shawna McCarthy

To The Editors:

I just finished reading Greg Bear's "Hardfought" in the February issue for the second time. I think it is one of the best science fiction stories that I have ever read. Its depiction of the far future was believable and mentally exhilarating. There are very few novels with that kind of imaginative power and complete vision. To find a short story with all of that plus something to say and a succinctly stated, compelling point of view is remarkable. Good show, *IAsfm*! I hope to see more of Mr. Bear's work in your magazine.

To Dr. Asimov: Re: your February editorial. Don't worry so much about it. Geez! If you feel like writing a story, write one. If the editors think it's up to the standards of the magazine and want to print it, let 'em. What's the big deal? If the new Foundation book is any good (I haven't read it yet, but it sure looks good from the excerpt) then you're doing your readers a favor by bringing it to their attention. If it weren't any good I don't believe you or Doubleday would let it get out the door. When we, as readers, buy a book, we get something out of the transaction too, you know. Have a little more faith in your product. Frankly I just want to open the magazine and read one great story after another. That's all. I don't give a damn who writes them and I don't think that anyone else really does either. So loosen up. To have your mind occupied with such trifling nonsense is the waste of a national resource, in my opinion. Write. Be happy.

Very truly yours,

Michael T. Folie
New York, NY

All right! Don't yell! Don't yell! I'll do what I can.

—Isaac Asimov

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MARTIN GARDNER

FIBONACCI BAMBOO

Everybody knows how widely bamboo is used in the Orient, for a thousand different things, but few are aware that it is the fastest growing of all woody-stemmed plants. In some areas such as Sri Lanka it can grow at a rate of 16 inches in a single day, often reaching a height of more than 100 feet. If the tip of a bamboo stalk is viewed through a powerful microscope, you can actually *see* it grow!

It was near the middle of the twenty-first century that Professor Mitsu Matsu, a Tokyo geneticist, succeeded in engineering a new bamboo species that he called Fibonacci bamboo because of its remarkable way of growing. Not only did it grow at a steadily accelerating rate, but the rate conformed precisely to what mathematicians call a generalized Fibonacci sequence.

"Yes," said Dr. Matsu one sunny afternoon to Dr. Beatrice Mince, a visiting geneticist from Philadelphia, "each day's growth is exactly equal to the growth of the two preceding days. If a stalk grows a feet the first day, and b feet the second day, the third day's growth of c feet will equal a plus b."

"And the fourth day the growth will be b plus c?" asked Dr. Mince, gazing in wonder at the tall hollow "trees" that were

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sprouting in the dense bamboo forest through which they were strolling.

"Exactly. Every twenty-four hours the growth for that period is precisely the sum of the growths on the preceding two days. Fortunately, when a stalk reaches a height of about five hundred feet, it stops growing."

"I know that Fibonacci sequences are involved in the growth patterns of many plants," said Dr. Mince, "but this is really fantastic." She reached out to touch a bamboo joint that was making a faint humming sound. She could feel it vibrating. "How much will this stalk grow today?"

"One hundred feet," Dr. Matsu replied.

"And when did it start to grow?"

"Six a.m. last Sunday. Today is Saturday. By tomorrow morning at six it will have grown for exactly one week."

"How much did it grow on the first and second days?"

"I don't recall," said Dr. Matsu. "Different strains of Fibonacci bamboo grow at different rates during the first two days. I'll have to check my records."

This presents us with a pretty problem in number theory. Assume that the seven integers that represent the stalk's growth, on each of the seven days, form the longest possible Fibonacci chain that ends in 100. Assume also that the second day's growth exceeds that of the first day, and that each day's growth is an integral number of feet. You now have all the information you need to determine how many feet the stalk grew on the first day and on the second day. If the problem bamboozles you, turn to page 56 for the answer.

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★★★★★ METRO FINAL

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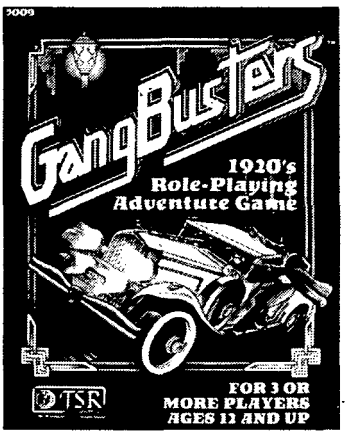

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IAsfm Puzzle #14 by Merl H. Reag

LUNACY

ACROSS

1 Certain donor's stat
4 Batter's stats
8 Baylor rival
11 Sailor's delight
13 "Moon Over____"
14 December sleigh stop
15 Malay dagger
16 Adj. suffix, in biol.
17 Melville novel
18 The first full one after 26 Across
20 Las ——(certain Nevada residents)
22 Meal type
23 Meal list
24 Sword and sorcery, for one
26 Satellite of song
30 Webster's antithesis, perhaps
31 Treas. chief, e.g.
32 Bright enough for lovers
33 Commit a foul
34 Fun times
37 "Make —— double"
38 Bush, for one
40 Short subjects for Moon Zappa
41 "—— happen to you"
43 Anagram of ASTRONOMERS
45 Word segment meaning "wedge"
46 Miss Piggy's makeup?
47 Father of the Ushers
48 Fritz Lang film of 1955
51 Town south of San Francisco
56 Sword and sorcery film starring Miles O'Keeffe
57 Vacation spot
59 Author Murdoch
60 MacDonald-Eddy musical of 1940
61 Introduction to Joe's?
62 The moon has a dark one
63 Certain building blocks
64 Dawn
65 Sea, to Verne

DOWN

1 Type of rival
2 Luke Skywalker's aunt
3 VIP at Valhalla
4 Social worker Jacob
5 "—— Rising," Creedence Clearwater hit
6 "—— ba-a-ad boy"
7 Satellite of song
8 Cube of recreational math fame
9 What ☾ indicates
10 Certain unexplained phenomena
12 Variety of feldspar
13 "—— d'Arthur"
14 Algis Budrys classic
19 "From the —— to the Moon"
21 Stationery buy: abbr.
23 Big department store
24 Makes the matador pay
25 Beautiful bird
26 Ball wear
27 Mishit a golfball
28 A moon of Saturn
29 The Addams Family is perennially trying to get one at night
30 Famed cult leader

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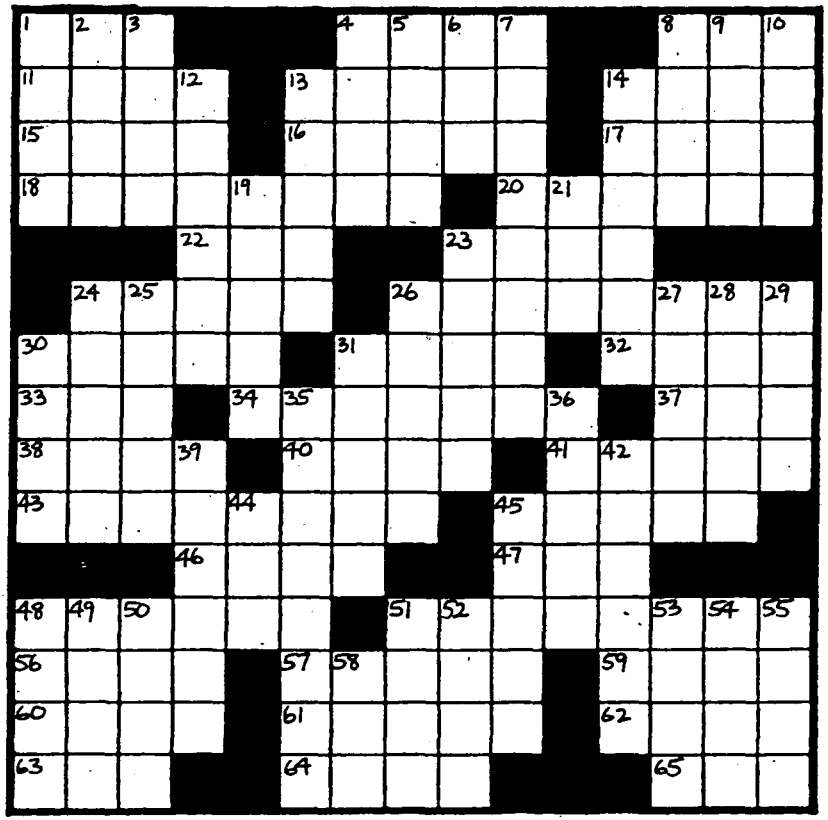
Solution on page 166

31 Lewis Carroll character
35 Where a nursery character jumped
36 Had a —— tea
39 O'Neal-O'Neal film of 1973
42 "—— A Harsh Mistress"
44 Sturgeon output
45 Deal with atoms
48 "The —— Sixpence"
49 Certain fighter plane
50 Bass note
51 Sex researcher
52 Imperial walker of "Empire Strikes Back"
53 Hat part
54 Sidekick
55 French-Belgian river
58 —— in apple



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IMPROBABLE BESTIARY: The Time Traveler

Come on right in and we'll begin
While I adjust the screen.
For I'm the Chronic Argonaut,
And here's my Time Machine.
Just pick a place in Time or Space
(Or somewhere in between)
Sit back, and then we'll go *Somewhen*
Inside my Time Machine!

Pick an era to suit yourself: visit your future self.
See ancient Rome in its glory.
You can breakfast with cavemen, or fly with the brave men
Who ride the first ship to Centauri.
You can witness the flight of those brothers named Wright,
You can fight an extinct carnivore.
And enlist and enlist and enlist and enlist
And enlist in the Hundred Years' War.

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Come on right in and we'll begin
While I adjust the screen.
(*Steady on a bit: I've said that already, haven't I?*)
For I'm the Chronic Argonaut,
And here's my Time Machine.
(*Ah, hullo! I see the problem: we're stuck in a closed-loop dimensional continuum, and Time is repeating itself over and over again. How interesting.*)
Just pick a place in Time or Space or Time or Space or Time or Space or Time or Space or (*Hmmm, the time-stream appears to be doubling back on itself. Hand me that spanner wrench and stand back, won't you?*) Time or Space or Time or Space or . . . *WHACK!*
Ah, that's much better, thanks. Now, which time-stream are we *in?*

We'll have lunch with Rasputin and Sir Isaac Newton
While sailing aboard the *Titanic.*
We'll have dinner at one with Attila the Hun
In the midst of the Stock Market Panic.
We'll eat Dinosaur pie and a Dodo on rye
While the maidens of Babylon serve us.
(I'm informed Jack the Ripper is quite a good tipper,
But makes all the waitresses nervous.)

Come down the hatch and close the latch while I turn back
the clocks.
We're off to reach Infinity; next stop is Paradox!
If anyone wants the Renaissance
Or the early Pleistocene
Or One Million A.D., they can travel with me
Inside my Time Machine!

—F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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GAMING

by Dana Lombardy

Ogre by Steve Jackson Games (Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760) is a great SF game. It hypothesizes a 21st century in which mechanized warfare has replaced long-range nuclear missiles because these proved too vulnerable to jamming technology, laser anti-aircraft weapons, and better countermeasures.

Fast, heavily armored tanks dominate the battlefields in Earth's future, while armored infantrymen with tactical nuclear weapons jet in and out to try a quick strike.

One armored vehicle in particular is most feared. Protected by two to three *meters* of the new light-weight biphase carbide armor, with computer-controlled intelligence (no human crew members), the 50-meter-long behemoths frighten even their own troops. These cyber tanks are simply called "ogres."

Ogre comes in a unique 4¼-inch by 7¼-inch "Pocket Box" plastic storage case designed to fit in a hip or coat pocket without crushing. A full-color paper game map unfolds to show a typical devastated battlefield with craters, rubble, and clear areas at a scale of 1500 meters across each hex. Also included are 112 backprinted ½-inch cardboard counters representing Mark III and Mark V Ogres, heavy tanks, missile tanks, Ground Effects Vehicles (GEV), howitzers, infantry, and command posts which need to be cut out with scissors to play.

There's a small ziplock bag provided to store the counters once they've been cut out. A small-format 16-page rules book consists of only 11 pages of actual instructions. The remainder consists of an introductory story and record sheets for keeping track of damage accumulated on each vehicle. A six-sided die is needed that's not provided so you'll have to "borrow" one from any game on your shelf.

The basic game version pits one player with 12 armor units, an infantry force, and a command post against a player attacking with only *one* unit—but that unit is an Ogre. It's an even match. The only way to stop an Ogre is to nibble away at it, but losses against it will usually be high even when suc-

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cessful. Four other scenarios are provided in the game for two or more players. *Ogre* is fun; you can play it in under an hour, and it's one of the best examples of a mini-game.

Ogre was so successful that a companion game, *G.E.V.*, was brought out a year later. Packaged in the same style "Pocket Box," *G.E.V.* has a slightly larger full-color map showing an undevastated area with roads, railroads, towns, forests, swamps, streams, and bridges. Also included are 112 back-printed ½-inch cardboard counters representing Mark IV Ogres, Ground Effects Vehicles (GEV—armored air-cushion vehicles), heavy, missile, and light tanks, howitzers, infantry, and trains.

If you try *Ogre*, you may get hooked on the series. For people who appreciate fun SF games, these are highly recommended. ●

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SAVING HUMANITY

The Good Doctor is back with another "George and Azazel" story. This one will show that you must choose your words *very* carefully when making a request of a demon. Enjoy.

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My friend, George, sighing lugubriously, said to me one evening, "I have a friend who is a klutz."

I nodded wisely. "Birds of a feather," I said.

George gazed at me in astonishment. "What have feathers to do with it? You have the most remarkable ability to skid away from a subject. It is the result, I suppose, of your thoroughly inadequate intellect—which I mention in pity, and not as reproof."

"Well, well," I said, "let that be as it may. When you refer to your friend the klutz, are you speaking of Azazel?"

Azazel was the two-centimeter demon or extraterrestrial being (take your pick) concerning whom George talks constantly, ceasing only in response to a direct question. Freezingly, he said, "Azazel is not a subject for conversation, and I do not understand how you came to have heard of him."

"I happened to be within a mile of you one day," I said. George paid no attention, but said:

I first came across the uneuphonious word "klutz," in fact, through a conversation with my friend, Menander Block. You have never met him, I'm afraid, for he is a University man and therefore rather selective in his friendships—for which one, observing you, can scarcely blame him.

The word, klutz, he told me, referred to an awkward, clumsy person. "And that's me," he said. "It comes from a Yiddish word that, taken literally, means a piece of wood, a log, a block; and, of course, my name, as you will note, is Block."

He heaved an enormous sigh. "And yet I am not a klutz in the strict meaning of the word. There is nothing wooden, loggish or blockish about me. I dance as lightly as a zephyr and as gracefully as a dragonfly; I am sylphlike in every motion; and numerous young women could testify, if I thought it safe to allow them to do so, of my skill as a disciple of the amatory art. It is, rather, that I am a klutz at long distance. Without being myself affected, everything about me becomes klutzish. The very Universe itself seems to trip over its own cosmic feet. I suppose if you want to mix languages and combine Greek with Yiddish, I am a 'teleklutz.' "

"How long has this been going on, Menander?" I asked.

"All my life, but, of course, it was only as an adult that I realized this peculiar quality I possess. While still a youth, I simply assumed that what happened to me was the normal state of affairs."

"Have you discussed this with anyone?"

"Of course not, George, old fellow. I would be considered mad. Can you see a psychoanalyst, for instance, confronting the phe-

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nomenon of teleklutzism. He would have me in the funny house half way through my first session and write a paper on his discovery of a new psychosis and probably become a millionaire as a result. I'm not going to the booby hatch just to enrich some psychomedical leech. I cannot tell *anyone* this."

"Then why are you telling me this, Menander?"

"Because, on the other hand, it seems to be I must tell someone if I am to remain functional. As it happens, you are the least someone I know."

I did not follow his reasoning there, but I could see that I was about to be subjected once again to the unwanted confidences of my friends. It was the price, I well knew, of the fact that I was proverbial for my understanding, sympathy, and, most of all, for my close-mouthed reticence. No secret placed in my keeping would ever reach the ears of anyone else—I make an exception in your case, of course, since it is well-known that you have an attention span of five seconds, and a memory-span of rather less.

I signalled for another drink and indicated, by a certain arcane sign that I alone know, that it was to be placed on Menander's tab. A laborer, after all, is worthy of his hire. I said, "Just how does this teleklutzism manifest itself, Menander?"

"In its simplest form, and in the manner that was first brought to my attention, it shows up in the peculiar weather that accompanies my travels. I do not travel very much, and when I do, I go by car, and when I do *that*, it rains. It doesn't matter what the weather forecast is; it doesn't matter how brightly the sun is shining when I start out. The clouds gather, grow darker and it begins to drizzle and then to pour. When my teleklutzism is in particular fettle, the temperature drops and we have an ice-storm.

"Of course, I am careful not to be foolish. I refuse to drive into New England until March is safely over. Last spring, I drove to Boston on April 6—which promptly had the first April blizzard in the history of the Boston Weather Bureau. I once drove to Williamsburg, Virginia, on March 28, assuming that I might be allowed a few days of grace considering that I was penetrating Dixie. Hah! Williamsburg had nine inches of snow that day and the natives were trying to rub some of it between their fingers and were asking each other what the white stuff was.

"I have often thought that if we imagined the Universe to be under the personal direction of God, we might picture Gabriel rushing into the divine presence to cry out, 'Holy One, two galaxies are about to collide in an unimaginably enormous catas-

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trophe', and God would answer, 'Don't bother me now, Gabriel; I'm busy making it rain on Menander.' "

I said, "You might make the best of the situation, Menander. Why not sell your services, for fabulous sums, as a drought-breaker?"

"I have thought of that, but the mere thought dries up any rain that might occur during my travels. Besides, if the rain came when it was needed, it would probably produce a flood.

"And it's not only rain, or traffic jams, or the disappearance of landmarks; there are myriads of other things. Expensive objects break spontaneously in my presence, or are dropped by others through no fault attributable to myself. There is an advanced particle accelerator in operation in Wheaton, Illinois. One day an enormously important experiment was ruined because of the failure of its vacuum; a completely unexplained failure. Only I knew (the next day, that is, when I read of the incident in the paper) that at the very moment of failure, I happened to be passing the outskirts of Wheaton in a bus. It was raining, of course.

"At this very moment, old fellow, some of the fine five-day-old wine in the cellars of this excellent establishment, being aged in the best plastic, is turning sour. Someone brushing past this table at this moment will, when he arrives home, find that the pipes in his cellar have burst at the precise moment he passed me; except that he won't know that he passed me at that precise moment and that the passage was the cause. And so it will be with myriads of accidents; supposed accidents, that is."

My heart bled for my young friend. And my blood froze at the thought that I was sitting next to him and that at my cozy digs unimaginable catastrophes might be taking place.

I said, "You are, in short, a jinx!"

Menander threw his head back and stared down his nose at me in a most unpleasant way. "Jinx," he said, "is the common term; teleklutz is the scientific one."

"Well, then, jinx or teleklutz, suppose I told you I could perhaps remove this curse from you?"

"Curse is right," Menander said, gloomily, "I have often thought that, at the time of my birth, an ill-natured fairy, irked at not having been invited to the christening . . . Are you trying to tell me you can cancel curses because you are a good fairy?"

"I am not any kind of fairy," I said severely. "Just suppose I can remove this cur—condition of yours."

"How on Earth could you do that?"

"Not exactly on Earth," I said. "But how about it?"

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"What do *you* get out of it?" he asked, suspiciously.

"The heart-warming feeling of having helped save a friend from a horrible life."

Menander thought about it and then shook his head firmly. "That's not enough."

"Of course, if you want to offer me some small sum—"

"No, no. I wouldn't think of insulting you that way. Offer a sum of money to a *friend*? Place a fiscal value on friendship? How could you think that of me, George? What I meant was that removing my teleklutzism isn't enough. You must do more than that."

"How can one do more?"

"Consider! Through my life I have been responsible for anything from inconvenience to catastrophe to perhaps millions of innocent people. Even if I brought no ill-fortune to a single person from this moment on, the evil I have done thus far—even though none of it was voluntary or in any way to be considered my fault—is more than I can bear. I must have something that will cancel it all out."

"Like what?"

"I must be in a position to save humanity."

"Save humanity?"

"What else can possibly balance the immeasurable damage I have done? George, I insist. If you are going to remove my curse, replace it with the ability to save humanity in some great crisis."

"I'm not sure that I can."

"*Try*, George. Don't shy away at this crisis. If you're going to do a job, do it well, I always say. Think of humanity, old friend."

"Wait a moment," I said, alarmed, "you're putting this whole thing on my shoulders."

"Of course I am, George," Menander said, warmly. "Broad shoulders! Good shoulders! Made to bear burdens! Go home, George, and arrange to remove this curse from me. A grateful humanity will shower you with blessings except, of course, that they will never hear of it, for I will tell no one. Your good deeds are not to be shamed by exposure, and rely on me, I will never expose them."

There is something wonderful about unselfish friendship. It can be duplicated by nothing else on Earth. I rose at once to get to my task and left so quickly that I neglected to pay my half of the dinner bill. Fortunately, Menander did not notice this till I was safely out of the restaurant.

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I had some trouble getting in touch with Azazel and in opening the hyperdimensional gateway between his world and ours. Nor did he seem good-natured about it at all. His two-centimeter-tall body was wrapped in a pinkish glow and, in his piping voice, he said, "Has it occurred to you that I might be showering?"

And indeed there was a very faint smell of ammonia about him.

I said, humbly, "This is a rather enormous emergency, oh Mighty-One-For-Whom-Words-Are-Insufficient."

"Well then, tell me, but mind, don't take all day about it."

"Certainly!" I said, and outlined the matter with admirable conciseness.

"Hmm," said Azazel. "For once you have presented me with an interesting problem."

"I have? Do you mean there is indeed such a thing as teleklutzism?"

"Oh, yes. It is common on my world and is usually removed by inoculation during childhood. You see quantum mechanics makes it quite clear that the properties of the Universe depend, to a certain extent, on the observer. Just as the Universe affects the observer, the observer affects the Universe. Some observers affect the Universe adversely, or at least adversely with respect to some other observers. Thus, one observer may accelerate the supernovadom of some star, which would irritate other observers who may find themselves uncomfortably close to that star at the time."

"I see. Well, can you inoculate my friend, Menander, and remove this quantum-observational effect of his?"

"Oh, of course! Simple! It will take ten seconds and then I can return to my shower and to the rite of laskorati I will thereafter undertake with two saminis of unimaginable loveliness."

"Wait! Wait! That's not enough."

"Don't be silly. Two saminis are *quite* enough. Only a lecher would want three."

"I mean removing the teleklutzism isn't enough. Menander also wants to be in a position to save humanity."

For a minute, I thought Azazel was going to forget our long friendship and all I had done for him in the way of supplying him with interesting problems that probably improved his mind and his scientific abilities. I did not understand all he said, for most of the words were in his own language but they sounded very much like saws scraping along rusty nails.

Finally, having cooled down to a dim red-heat, he said, "Now how am I going to do that?"

"Is anything too much for the Apostle-of-Incredibility?"

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"You bet! —But let's see!" He thought for a while, and burst out, "But who in the Universe would *want* to save humanity? Where's the worth in doing that? You stink up this whole section. . . . Well, well, I think it can be done."

It didn't take ten seconds. It took half an hour and a very uncomfortable half-hour it was, too, with Azazel groaning part of the time and the rest of the time stopping to wonder if the samini were going to wait for him.

He was done eventually and, of course, it meant I would have to test out the matter on Menander Block.

When I next saw Menander, I said, "You're cured."

He stared at me hostilely, "Do you know that you stuck me with the dinner check the other night?"

"Surely a minor point compared with the fact that you're cured."

"I don't feel cured."

"Well, come. Let's take a drive together. You take the wheel."

"It looks cloudy already. Some cure!"

"Drive! What have we to lose?"

He backed the car out of his garage. A man passing by on the other side of the street did not trip over an overloaded garbage can.

He drove down the street. The light did not turn red as he approached, and two cars skidding toward each other at the next intersection but one, missed each other by a comfortable margin.

By the time he was at the bridge, the clouds had thinned out and a warm sun was shining down upon the car. It was not in his eyes.

When we finally got home, he was weeping unashamedly, and I parked the car for him. I scraped it slightly, but it might have been worse. I might have scraped my own car.

For the next few days, he was seeking me out constantly. I was the only one, after all, who could understand the miracle that had taken place.

He would say, "I went to a dance, and not one couple tripped over each other's feet and fell down and broke a collar bone or two. I could dance sylphlike with utter abandon and my partner never got sick to her stomach, even though she had eaten most unwisely."

Or, "At work they were installing a new air-conditioning unit and not once did it fall upon a workman's toes, breaking them permanently."

Or even, "I visited a friend in a hospital, something I once

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wouldn't have dreamed of doing, and in not one of the rooms that I passed did the intravenous needle pop out of a vein. Nor did a single hypodermic miss its appropriate target."

Sometimes, he would ask me, brokenly, "Are you sure that I will have a chance to save humanity?"

"Absolutely," I would say. "That's part of the cure."

But then, one day he came to me and there was a frown on his face. "Listen," he said. "I just went to the bank to ask a question about my bank-balance, which is a little lower than it should be because of the way you manage to get out of restaurants before the bill shows up, and I couldn't get an answer because the computer went down just as I walked in. Everyone was puzzled. Is the cure wearing off?"

"It can't do that," I said. "Maybe it had nothing to do with you. There might be some other teleklutz around who hasn't been cured. Maybe he happened to walk in just as you did."

But that wasn't it. The bank's computer went down on two other occasions when he tried to check his bank balance. (His nervousness over the paltry sums I had neglected to take care of was quite nauseating in a grown man.) Finally, when the computer at his firm went down when he walked past the room in which it was housed, he came to me in what I can only describe as panic.

"It's back, I tell you. It's back!" he screamed. "I can't take it this time. Now that I'm accustomed to normality, I can't go back to my old life. I'll have to kill myself."

"No, no, Menander. That's going too far."

He seemed to check himself at the edge of another scream and thought over my sensible remark. "You're right," he said. "That *is* going too far. Suppose I kill you, instead. After all, no one will miss you, and it will make me feel a *little* better."

I saw his point, but only to a slight extent. I said, "Before you do anything at all, let me check this out. Be patient, Menander. After all, so far it's only happened with computers, and who cares about computers?"

I left quickly before he could ask me how he was supposed to get his bank balance if computers were always going down at his approach. He was really a monomaniac on the subject.

So was Azazel, on another subject. It seems that this time he was actually involved in whatever he was doing with the two samini, and he was still turning somersaults when he arrived. To this day, I don't know what the somersaults had to do with it.

I don't think he ever actually cooled down, but he did manage

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to explain to me what happened and then I was faced with having to explain it to Menander.

I insisted on meeting him in the park. I chose a fairly crowded section since I would have to rely on instant rescue if he should lose his head figuratively, and try to make me lose mine literally.

I said, "Menander, your teleklutsism still works, but only for computers. *Only for computers*. You have my word on that. You are cured for everything else *forever*."

"Well, then, cure me for computers."

"As it happens, Menander, that can't be done. You are not cured for computers,—and forever." I rather whispered the last word but he heard me.

"Why? What kind of a hare-brained, idiotic, malapropistic, omniklutzistic rear end of a diseased Bactrian camel are you?"

"You make it sound as though there are many kinds, Menander, which doesn't make sense. Don't you understand that you wanted to save the world, and that's why it happened?"

"No, I don't understand. Explain it to me and take your time. You have fifteen seconds."

"Be reasonable! Humanity is facing a computer-explosion. Computers are going to become rapidly more versatile, more capable and more intelligent. Human beings are going to be ever-more dependent upon them. Eventually, a computer will be built that will take over the world and leave humanity with nothing to do. It may then well decide to wipe out humanity as unnecessary. Of course, we tell ourselves smugly that we can always 'pull the plug,' but you know we won't be able to do that. A computer smart enough to do the work of the world without us will be able to defend its own plug and, for that matter, find its own electricity.

"It will be unbeatable, and humanity will be doomed. And that, my friend, is where you come in. You will be brought into its presence or perhaps you will only arrange to pass within a few miles of it and it will instantly break down, and humanity will be saved! *Humanity will be saved!* Think of it! Think of it!"

Menander thought of it. He didn't look happy. He said. "But meanwhile, I can't come near computers."

"Well, the computer-klutzism had to be nailed down and made absolutely permanent so that we could be sure that when the time came nothing would go wrong; that the computer would not somehow defend itself against you. It's the price you pay for this great gift of salvation that you yourself asked for and for which you will be honored through all future history."

"Yes?" he said, "and when is this salvation to take place?"

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I said, "According to Azaz—my sources, it should take place in sixty years or so. But look at it this way. Now you know that you will live to be at least ninety years old."

"And meanwhile," said Menander, in a loud voice, oblivious to the way people nearby turned to stare at us, "meanwhile, the world will grow more and more computerized and I will be unable to get near more and more places. I'll be unable to do more and more things and will be in a total prison of my own making—"

"But in the end you will save humanity! That's what you wanted!"

Menander shrieked, "To hell with humanity!" rose and hurled himself at me.

I managed to get away but only because there were people about who seized the poor fellow.

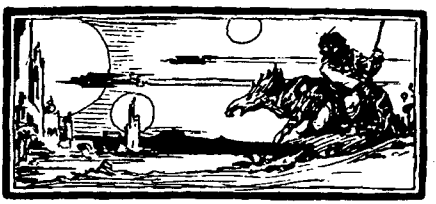
Today, Menander is in deep analysis with a Freudian psychiatrist of the most determined description. It will surely cost him a fortune and will, of course, do him no good whatever.

George, having finished his story, gazed into his pot of beer, for which I knew I would have to pay.

He said, "There's a moral to this story, you know."

"What is it?"

"People just don't have any gratitude!" ●



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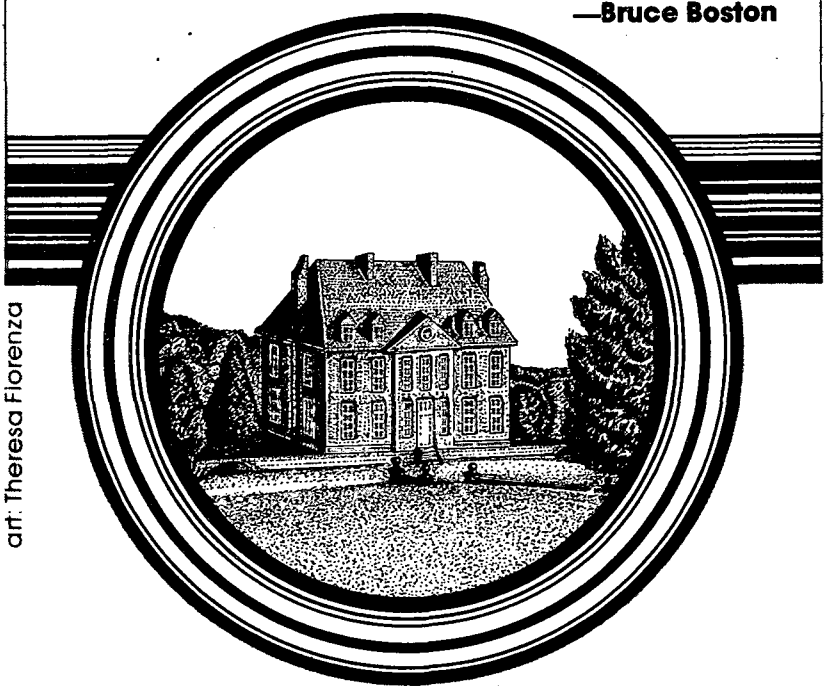
TIME'S HOUSE

Clinging to colonnades,
fading into false porticos,
beneath awnings and aluminum struts,
caught in the mouths of blunt stone gargoyles,
even lodged in the flat facades of Bahaus elevation,
the moment past remains.

Laugh across this pond
elastic and infinitely tangible
(our coincidence and dwelling place),
and a pink tumbleweed in the Adromeda Nebula,
unleashed by the concatenation of matter's sticky ways,
begins to turn.

Streaming to the sky and back
our universe is so much synergy rampant,
an unbridled rush of ongoing echo and reflection,
the architectonic singularity of a house built for all,
the moment past passed on until it plays its progressions
round again.

—**Bruce Boston**



art: Theresa Fiorenza

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VIEWPOINT

SUPERPOWERS!

by Tom Rainbow

art: Bob Walters

Readers will remember Dr. Rainbow from his ground-breaking Viewpoint article on mind-transfer in our June issue. Ever eager to continue expanding the frontiers of modern science, the intrepid doctor here explores the possibility of granting us, one and all, Superpowers! Those with a true interest in the subject will be happy to know that the author recently won a major fellowship award in neuroscience, bringing the day of our transformation ever closer. At the moment, however, Dr. Rainbow is assistant professor of Pharmacology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Now, let's be honest. Haven't you tried, at least once, to use the Force because George Lucas could be telling the *truth*? After you get an insect bite, haven't you tried to climb walls with your fingertips or lift cars because that insect could have been a *radioactive spider*? Haven't you ever thought that the reason you *can't* fly and you're *not* invulnerable is because

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you were accidently exposed to a rare form of red kryptonite which both removed your super-powers and your memory of your previous super-existence, and that at *any* moment, its effects will wear off, and your Kryptonian powers will return?

Sound familiar? Well, maybe I can help..

You see, all my life I wanted super-powers. I would have settled for *super-anything*, even super-hemorrhoid removal or super-dry cleaning. I became a scientist in part because most comic book super-heroes either are or were scientists, acquiring their powers from freakish lab accidents or by treatments of their own design. This hasn't worked out the way I hoped. For example, I've had *lots* of lab accidents, too numerous and embarrassing to elaborate on, and the most that ever happened to me was that I dissolved my pants. No super-speed. No ability to alter my molecular structure at will. Just instant Bermuda shorts.

As for concocting a formula or a device to endow me with super-human abilities, well, I learned fairly quickly that this was hardly the kind of thing that a junior scientist should pursue if he expected to obtain tenure at any institution other than the University of Transylvania. Still, although professional reasons dissuade me from developing Spider-Man serums or psionic amplifiers, I can at least *think* about doing it. Heck, at the rate my scientific career is progressing, I could do a *lot* worse than to end up at Transylvania U.

Unlikely Origins

It is apparent to those of us with mad scientist inclinations that the origins of most comic book super-heroes are extremely improbable. Many super-hero origins rely on accidental exposure to radiation or other mutagens. The scientist Bruce Banner became the super-strong Incredible Hulk after a gamma-ray bomb exploded next to him. The Flash acquired super-speed when lightning shattered a cabinet

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in his laboratory, bathing him in an exotic chemical mixture. Peter Parker, *a.k.a.* the Amazing Spider-Man, obtained super-strength and super-agility from the bite of a radioactive spider. The probable rationale for supposing that mutagens can make you super-human results from the concept of *somatic mutations*. A somatic mutation is an alteration in the DNA of any cell other than the gametes. A sufficiently large change in the DNA instructions of a cell might produce alterations in its physiology or morphology. Somatic mutations in genes regulating cell division might be the cause of some forms of cancer. It is assumed by comic-book writers that radiation or chemical mutagens might produce somatic mutations that would *improve* cell functions, resulting in individuals with super-human powers.

Empirically, this isn't so, for the same reason that random pecks on a typewriter are unlikely to produce the *Foundation* series. Eukaryotic cells are very complicated machines, and arbitrary changes in their DNA instructions are likely to kill the cells or at best, cause them to become cancerous. The bite of a typical radioactive spider would probably only give you leukemia. I'll discuss later whether it's even possible to gain super-powers by making *deliberate* changes in your DNA, using genetic engineering techniques.

Is there any validity at all to the standard Cosmic Ray/Gamma Ray Super-Hero origin? Although desultory exposure to radiation or chemicals are unlikely to give you super-powers, there might be conditions under which so little is known about physical law that it is at least *conceivable* that you'll end up as a super-something. For instance, current theories of physics are unable to predict what might have occurred at times earlier than the first 10^{-43} seconds of the Big Bang. All sorts of interesting events may have happened before this time, including things that might explain why we have the particular physical laws that we have, as opposed

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"If we assume that a 250-lb. Olympic weightlifter can lift 500 lbs., and that 60 percent of his weight is skeletal muscle, then to lift three tons, you would have to add almost a ton of muscle to your frame, with an additional half-ton of bone and viscera. Now what's another name for a 1.5-ton human-shaped being that's incredibly strong? That's right! You'd be a monster! Maybe we should make your tooth DNA grow fangs to complete the effect."

to many imaginable others. I wrote a science-fiction story in which the main character was a graduate student in experimental astrophysics who accidentally stuck his head in the maul of a particle accelerator that was designed to reproduce the energies of the Big Bang. Although the energy of each particle was extremely high, the number of particles in the beam was correspondingly small, so instead of being reduced to his constitutive quarks, my hero merely suffered massive brain damage, easily corrected in the latter half of the twenty-first century. The aftermath of this accident left him with powers of prescience and telepathy. The exposure of my hero's brain to the conditions of the early Universe caused a micron-sized area of his cerebral cortex to have variable physical laws. His telepathy and prescience resulted from his ability to control the value of Planck's constant in this small region of his brain—he could drastically increase the normally tiny uncertainty in the spatial and temporal

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locations of his brain molecules.

Sounds pretty neat, huh? Unfortunately, the story was *profoundly* rejected by all the greater and lesser science-fiction magazines. Trivialities like plot and characterization will often take precedence in an editor's mind over plausible explanations of super-powers. Now, this is not to say that I would actually expect to get psi powers from sticking my head into the path of an ultra-high energy particle beam. Most probably, this would reduce my head to a hot, glowing gas. However, since current physics is unable to describe the events that occurred before the first 10^{-43} seconds of the Big Bang, no one could say with certainty that I *wouldn't* get psi powers. Let this be a lesson to all aspiring science-fiction writers. You only have to know what science doesn't know—the rest you can just make up.

Alas, the physics of relatively low-energy radiation such as the kind produced by a gamma-ray bomb or a radioactive spider-bite is understood very well. All you're likely to get from such exposures are bone cancer and funny kids. However, if the spider were zapped with conditions of the Big Bang before it fanged you, then by virtue of the Great Unknown, it's more plausible to believe that you'll obtain super-powers. Exposing the spider to the conditions *before* the Big Bang would be even better: Modern physics is unable to make any meaningful statement about the physical laws that operated in the pre-Big Bang Universe. The physical laws in this Universe could have been exactly the same as those used in Marvel comic books, where radioactive spider-bites give super-powers.

Super-Powers by Design

Given that comic book mutagen accidents are an unlikely way to become super, can we *deliberately* give ourselves super-abilities? Let's say we have a modern, well-equipped laboratory at a major Transylvanian University. How could we

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make ourselves superhuman?

First of all, we will rule out certain things as being either too easy or simply impossible. *Too easy* would include making ourselves into cyborgs or transferring our minds into super-powered android bodies. Super-strong prosthetic limbs *a la* TV's "The Six-Million Dollar Man" or innumerable science-fiction stories are completely feasible—their fabrication requires only the advances in microelectronics and material sciences that are likely to occur over the next twenty or thirty years. Similarly, the science-fiction technique of mind-transfer appears possible (See "The Feasibility of Mind-Transfer" in the June '83 *IAsfm*), and could be used to insert our consciousness into physically superior android bodies. Although we can obtain super-powers from cyborg parts or synthetic bodies, it's hardly the stuff of a good wish-fullfilment fantasy to have your arms cut off or to become a robot, so these methods would only be used if we got desperate.

Simply impossible would include giving you the powers of someone like Superman, or any sort of psi powers. The comic-book Superman is capable of lifting entire worlds, can shrug off the explosive force of a supernova and flies at trans-light speeds. There is no way that any material substance that obeys known physical laws could do this. Now, this is not to say that we can't someday *change* these physical laws on a local basis, so that the elementary particles of your body have different values for their physical constants or obey different physical laws. For example, the adhesion of biological molecules results ultimately from the attractive force between electrons and protons. Increasing the value of the electromagnetic force constant for your body would strengthen your molecular bonds, and thus give you a form of invulnerability. Of course, if we make it *too* strong, your electrons would collapse into your protons, and in a spectacular explosion, you'd become a neutron star. But, heck, that's just the way the mad scientist business can go

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Powers like telepathy or telekinesis fall into the impossible category because they also would require modifying existing physical laws. How would you levitate something? The only explanation that occurs to me is that you can change the object's gravitational constant with your mind. Again, this is not to say that this can't be done, but it would probably require the collaboration of the University of Transylvania Physics department if we are to pull it off. An interesting aside about psi powers is that many people think they exist outside of comic books and science-fiction stories. If *you* have ESP, and can document its existence under controlled circumstances, like in the presence of a professional magician, get in touch with me immediately! (A telepathic signal directed at a Dr. Tom Rainbow, Eastern USA will do just fine.) If you *know* anyone who has ESP, capture the filthy mutant and hold him for examination! By unraveling the structure of this creature's brain, we can understand the nature of its powers, win myself, er, *ourselves* Nobel Prizes in both Physics and Biology, and perhaps learn enough to duplicate the same structures in our own brains, thus acquiring its powers. Uh, I'll go first for this, because it'll probably be real dangerous and hurt a lot. No, No. Don't thank me! That's what being a scientist is all about.

Now, what powers could we realistically hope to acquire from our Transylvanian laboratory? How about something simple like a serum or treatment that would give us the strength and agility of Spider-Man? Spider-Man has the proportional strength and speed of a human-sized spider: he can lift over his head roughly forty times his own weight (three tons) and has a reaction time ten to twenty times faster than human average.[1] An Olympic weightlifter can perhaps lift twice his own weight (0.25 tons). The performance of a top video game player probably approximates the peak human reaction time.

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This may be two to three times the human average, given the way I play video games, and assuming I'm average.

Strength is directly proportional to muscle mass. Olympic weightlifters are strong because they have a lot of muscle. Women, on the average, have a third of the upper body strength of men because they have a third of the amount of upper torso muscle. Muscle mass is a function of the synthetic rate of contractile proteins in muscle cells. If your muscle-cell DNA were re-programmed to drastically increase the production of force-generating molecules, you could acquire the physique of an Olympic weightlifter without any exercise. This is currently beyond the abilities of genetic engineering technology, but it's only a matter of time before it becomes possible. Thus, to give you the strength of Spider-Man, we merely instruct your skeletal-muscle DNA to synthesize more contractile proteins.

How much muscle would we need? If we assume that a 250-lb. Olympic weightlifter can lift 500 lbs., and that 60 percent of his weight is skeletal muscle, then to lift three tons, you would have to add almost a ton of muscle to your frame, with an additional half-ton of bone and viscera. Now, what's another name for a 1.5-ton human-shaped being that's incredibly strong? That's right! You'd be a *monster*! A justly-deserved fate for your *hubristic* desires. Maybe we should make your tooth DNA grow fangs to complete the effect.

We could perhaps give you super-strength without hypertrophied muscles if the structure of your muscle contractile proteins could be modified to produce more force. This again could be done by coming-real-soon genetic engineering techniques. Muscle contraction and a variety of other cell movements result from the interaction of the proteins *actin* and *myosin*. Actin and myosin molecules form interdigitating filaments that stretch along the entire length of a muscle fiber.

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Projections from the myosin filaments, called *cross-bridges*, occur at regular intervals and link the filaments together. The contractile force of muscle results from an ATP-powered physical interaction between the myosin cross-bridges and the actin filaments. The cross-bridges essentially pull the actin filaments in steps, closer and closer towards the myosin filaments. This generates a longitudinal contractile force throughout the entire muscle fiber.

Very little is currently known about the cause of the motive force between the myosin cross-bridges and the actin filaments. Again, this information is forthcoming, and once in hand, it could be used perhaps to re-design the molecular structure of the cross-bridges, making them grab the actin filaments with greater avidity. The contractile force of muscle is linearly proportional to the rate that the actin and myosin filaments move towards each other, so if we could quadruple the rate of cross-bridge action, we would quadruple our strength.

Similarly, muscle strength is directly proportional to the distance the actin and myosin molecules slide during contraction. More sliding distance could be compressed into the same amount of space by making the filaments contract in a spiral-shaped pattern instead of the straight-line path they now follow. If we quadruple the number of monomers in an actin filament and coil it so that the length doesn't change, we will quadruple the actin-myosin contraction distance and thus quadruple our strength. Actin makes up roughly four percent of the weight of a muscle, so increasing by four the number of actin monomers will have a relatively minor effect on your total body weight.

Is it possible to increase your reaction time without becoming some sort of hyper-reflexed alien beast? Well, reaction time can be defined as the time in seconds that it takes from the arrival of a sensory stimulus to the occurrence of a motor action. The length of this time depends on both the intrinsic

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biophysical properties of neurons and the amount of interneuronal processing. To illustrate: it takes roughly thirty milliseconds to process a visual stimulus. Your brain will merge images that change at intervals less than this time. This is what makes TV and movies possible. This thirty-millisecond period is a function of how long it takes a retinal cell to alter its electrical activity in response to light (a few milliseconds), how long it takes for the signal to travel to the visual areas of the brain (maybe ten milliseconds), and the time it takes to synthesize a visual image from the signal transmitted by the optic nerve (roughly twenty milliseconds). To react to this stimulus, like to change the TV channel, adds on the time it takes for the associational areas of the brain to communicate with the motor areas and how long it takes for the signal from your motor cortex to travel to the relevant muscles. It may take 100 to 300 milliseconds to manifest a simple motor response to a visual stimulus.

We estimated that Spider-Man would take only five to thirty milliseconds to respond to a stimulus. There are two ways to decrease human reaction time to this level. The first is to increase the efficiency of how the brain processes information, since this is the most time-consuming component of human reaction time. This would require re-wiring your brain so that sensory information would have quicker access to motor effector neurons. While this is possible, and is one reason why lower vertebrates, such as frogs and many of the teen-agers at my local arcade, have fast reaction times, it is a task that would tax the resources of even a Transylvanian scientist. An easier alternative might be to tamper with the molecular properties of neurons so that they transmit signals faster. Nerves transmit signals by changing their permeability to sodium and potassium ions in the seawater-like extracellular fluid of the brain. When the interior voltage potential of the neuron crosses a certain

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threshold, a rapid increase in ionic conductance occurs, known as an *action potential.* Like a row of dominoes falling, a single action potential will then depolarize neighboring patches of the neuronal membrane, causing a signal to be transmitted throughout the cell.

The principal molecular components in creating an action potential are the *ion channels*, proteins embedded in the neuronal membrane that act as gates to admit or exclude sodium or potassium ions. Again, not much is presently known about how ion channels work, but when we obtain this information, it's plausible to imagine that their molecular structure could be altered to hasten the onset of an action potential. It's also conceivable that simply increasing the density of ion channels on the neuronal membrane will speed up your reaction time, without overstimulating your brain and causing you to have convulsions.

It does seem possible, then, to give you both the speed and strength of Spider-Man, without postulating more than the normal advances in biological knowledge and biotechnology that are likely to occur over the next ten or twenty years. A good Transylvanian scientist is *always* ten or twenty years ahead of the rest of the world, otherwise his main experimental subjects, the local villagers, will have him *disemboweled.* It is likely that other kinds of super-powers could be obtained by advanced biotechnology. For example, given sufficient knowledge about the control of cell growth, it should be possible to make your body repair any damage almost immediately, making you essentially indestructible. This would be particularly handy if you're about to be disemboweled.

Helpful Hints For The Super-human

Whether you get them from sticking your head in an ultra-high energy accelerator or by DNA treatments to induce super-sodium channels, there are several things that you, the nascent super-being,

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should know before using your super-powers.

First, unless you have abilities comparable to Superman's, *keep your powers secret*! Once the world learns that a super-powered being exists, your days are numbered. People like me will want to vivisect you in the hope of winning a Nobel Prize, other people like me will attempt to steal your powers and transfer to themselves, and still more people like me will attempt to coerce you into using your powers for our own egocentric purposes. We've read at least as many comic books as you have and you can't hope to defeat us all.

Forget about using a *secret identity* to help you. Even if you wear a full-faced mask, your voice and your build will be dead-giveaways as to who you are. You'd be amazed at what digital image and sound processing can accomplish these days. A computer-generated picture of your face will be broadcast on all the network newsprograms the day you first appear, along with a computer-generated version of your voice. You'll be overwhelmed in seconds by government agents and you'll spend the rest of your life imprisoned in that mythical underground secret research lab in Nevada.

No, if you plan to use your powers for anything more substantial than seeing through the walls of the girls' locker room, then your only hope is to enlist the co-operation of someone like myself. After all, it should be obvious from reading this article that I've thought a lot about the implications of having super-powers, and what better person to have as your ally than someone who might be the chief mastermind for the opposition? I'll teach you to use your powers wisely and for the good of Mankind. In fact, did you know that *evil aliens* have taken human form and are now occupying positions of extreme responsibility in Western Society, including acting as the editors of *major science-fiction magazines*? And that these aliens are doing incalculable harm to these

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magazines, including rejecting stories about people who get *plausible super-powers*? Your first super-mission will be to make *petfood* out of these editors, and thus restore decent science-fiction to the world. After that, well, there's this little health club where all the Playboy bunnies go after work. If you could see through the walls, or better yet, make us *both* see through the walls, there might be *lots* of evil aliens there . . . . ●

References

For more information about the first 10^{-43} seconds of the universe, try Steven Weinberg's excellent book *The First Three Minutes*, Basic Books, N.Y., 1977. A good text on the nervous system is the *Scientific American* anthology, *The Brain*, edited by David Hubel, W.H. Freeman, 1981. An excellent synopsis on the molecular basis of muscle contraction is the article by A. Weber and J. Murray in the Feb. 1974 *Scientific American* (Vol. 231).

1. For the benefit of you purists, the information on Spider-Man's strength was taken from the 1982 *Spider-Man Annual*. Frankly, nobody really knows how strong a spider is, relative to a human. I estimated the figure for Spider-Man's speed, based on his ability in the comic-books to dodge bullets and other rapidly-hurling projectiles. This estimate ignores the existence of Spider-Man's psi-based "Spider-Sense," which can warn him of danger before it actually occurs. With his Spider-Sense, Spider-Man actually has a negative reaction time.

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MARTIN GARDNER (from page 29)

SOLUTION TO FIBONACCI BAMBOO

What is called *the* Fibonacci series begins: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, ... A generalized Fibonacci sequence may start with any two positive integers whatever. The second number may be larger, smaller, or the same as the first. One of the most amazing of the many curious properties of such sequences is that the ratio between two consecutive terms approaches closer and closer to an irrational limit as the sequence continues. The limit for all Fibonacci sequences is the same. It is the famous "golden ratio" given by the expression:

$$\frac{\sqrt{5}+1}{2} = 1.61803\ 39887\ 49894\ 84820\ldots.$$

The golden ratio provides a simple way to solve our problem. The longest Fibonacci sequence terminating in 100 will have a next-to-last term, x, such that $100/x$ will differ from the golden ratio by less than 1. To determine x we need only solve the following equation:

$$\frac{100}{x} = 1.618+$$

This gives x a value of 61.80+. The next-to-last term of the sequence, therefore, will be either 61 or 62. If we round x down to 61, then subtract backward through the sequence from 100, we get the terms 100, 61, 39, 22, 17, 5, 12. We were told that the second day's growth exceeded the first day's growth, so we have to discard 12. This leaves a six-term sequence, therefore it is not the sequence we are seeking.

We now try rounding x up to 62. This gives the longer chain: 100, 62, 38, 24, 14, 10, 4, 6. As before, we must drop the 6 because it exceeds the second term, 4. We now have a sequence of seven terms in a chain that ends with 100. The sequence begins with 4 and 10, the two numbers that solve our problem.

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The method applies to all top numbers of a Fibonacci chain. If the last number is 1,000, you can easily determine that the longest chain terminating in 1,000 begins with 8, 2, 10, . . . , and has 13 terms. If the last number is one million, the longest chain has 20 terms and starts with 154 and 144.

Hundreds of entertaining puzzles are based on Fibonacci sequences. Suppose, for instance, a rectangle has sides a and b, and that c is the rectangle's area. If a, b, and c are consecutive terms in a generalized Fibonacci sequence, what is the area of the rectangle? The answer is on page 120.

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GLITCH

by Britton Bloom

The author is a journalist who has also spent time as an editorial assistant at *Amazing Stories*. This is his first published work of fiction.

art: Brad Hamann

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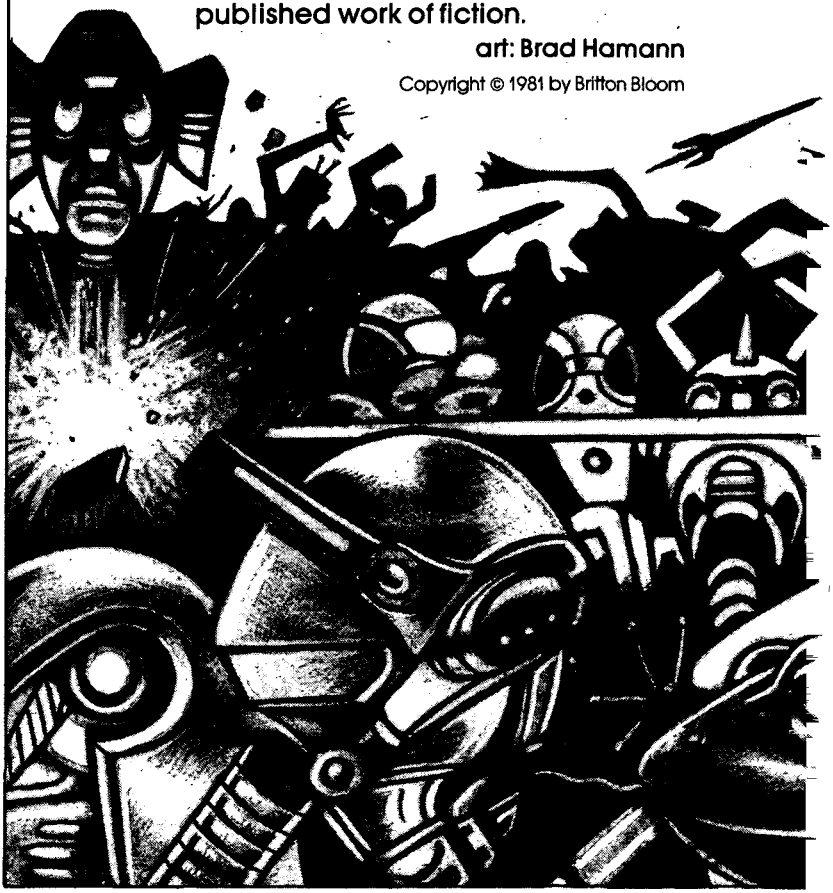

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In the brief microsecond before the ore transporter crashed into his car, Edward Stanner knew he was going to die.

In that flashing moment, he knew he had wasted his life bowing and scraping, worshiping and placating the mass of metal and silicon chips that controlled the city and the lives of the people in it.

In that last split second, Stanner knew being ground into hamburger was preferable to returning to the MasterComp Controller programmers' office and to the dull plodders who kept the computer happy and the city functioning properly.

In the brief microsecond before the ore transporter crashed into his car, Edward Stanner felt free.

Then the transporter hit.

The quiet of the Chicago night shattered with the scream of metal as the transporter ripped off the passenger side of Stanner's car; the noise disturbed no one in that section of town, as the industrial park was deserted at night. Only one derelict in a doorway was roused from his faded dreams in time to see the crumpled mass of Stanner's car flying towards him. If the thought of approaching death registered in the drunk's mind, it was all over before his brain recognized the fact.

All of which left Stanner sitting stunned, two meters away from the crash site, his clothes ripped to shreds on his body, but the body itself somehow untouched.

His mind spun through the millions of thoughts that presented themselves to him and settled on his most recent emotion: *Free.*

Free, his mind said.

Free echoed through every cell of his miraculous body. Free hands, free toes, free kneecaps and nose. Free.

Crazily free, deliciously free, randomly free. Unplugged, unfettered, deprogrammed. Almost killed but one hundred percent alive—and FREE!

He stood up carefully testing himself, but found he was unhurt, except for one small scratch on his hip where the steering wheel had ripped away his pants. He flexed his muscles and drew a deep breath, just to feel the movement of his body—the first time he had enjoyed being alive since he was a kid.

Then he turned from the wreck of his car and his past life, and walked away.

He'd had no business being in that part of town, he knew, so the MasterComp traffic control sector could not have known his car would be crossing the path of the ore transporter at that moment and so divert it. Perhaps Stanner was to blame—he had

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worked late and was taking a different route home, just to get some variety in his monotonous daily routine. Nothing really different, just a sight of some new buildings.

Fifteen blocks later, Stanner passed in front of a residential building whose only wakeful inhabitant happened to glance out the window at that particular moment. Alice Hopkins was awake with a vague restlessness she had recently developed.

The sight of a naked man walking down the street struck some dim memory of her childhood days on the family farm near Chilton, Nebraska, where she and her brothers used to skinny-dip in a pond; her dissatisfaction with the small community had driven her to the university and a career in space technologies in order to escape the confines of small-town narrowness. When a position as pilot opened up on the Earth-Mars run she jumped at the chance to share the romance and adventure of space travel. Instead she got a boring job on a boring run with boring people who knew only one topic to talk about and one activity when they touched down. The sight of Stanner set off the memory patterns that drove home the realization that she had never really left the skinny-dip pond in Nebraska. Her pond was bigger now, but it was still just as confining.

Stanner was unaware of Alice Hopkins' meditations; he didn't know her or care about her problems. He didn't care about any problems now. He was free.

MasterComp's eternal electronic vigilance felt something was wrong somewhere. It was aware that the iron oxide ore transporter was no longer running, which meant the time was 6:17 A.M. But its own chronometers indicated the time was 3:22 A.M. and its photoelectric cells could detect no sunlight. Still, MasterComp's printed circuits reasoned, its chronometers might be in error and the day might be cloudy. Just to be sure, MasterComp activated the morning pattern of traffic lights and commercial stores' opening sequences—doors unlocked and coffee machines began brewing. If there was a problem, subsequent feedins would define it.

Stanner noticed the lights in several department stores going on and pushed gently on the door of the Xerox department store. It opened. Not understanding why the shops were open in the middle of the night—and not really caring—Stanner went in.

He found himself in a Christmas dream and was no longer the thirty-two-year-old Edward Stanner, programmer in the

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MasterComp's food-services section. Eddy wandered around the store, touching the brightly colored cosmetics, the mannequins dressed in stunning fashions, the ties, belts, and cuff links that sparkled in the display lights.

He ended up in the clothing section of the store, and picked out a beautiful pair of orange trousers. A deep purple shirt caught his eye in the next rack of clothes, and he put it on. On the coat racks he saw a bright green sportscoat which fitted as though it had been made for him.

He stood in front of a mirror to see the effect of his new clothes and nodded. This was the truth, he thought. There was nothing in the reflection to link him to the Edward Stanner who had worked in the MasterComp bowels that day. This being, staring back at him with wide, happy eyes, was no one he'd seen before, except in rare daydreams.

Whistling, he turned away and headed for the front door. But passing through the toy department he was enraptured by the long line of windup robots gleaming in their displays. Idly he picked one up—a metal giant fifty centimeters tall, with shining chrome body armor and spiral eyes that spun, and antennae that popped up and down. "Galaxy Guardian," he read on the robot's breastplate.

He wound the robot's key until he felt the Guardian pulsing with energy and the desire to save the galaxy, then set it down. Miracles! The Guardian marched around in a circle, shooting sparks from its ears and clanking in a most protective manner. Stanner was delighted.

He found two other robots and set them to running on the floor as well. When his Guardian saw the new intruders it beeped a warning. The two newcomers noticed the hostile robot and threatened it with their missiles, proclaiming department store domination by their evil overlord. Stanner became concerned for his Guardian and loosed a dozen mechanical frogs so the Guardian would not be alone in his battle.

The frogs responded to the bleeps of the Guardian and rallied to its aid, swarming around the legs of the invader robots. With reinforcements at hand, the Guardian came up to the challenge and fired its lasers, disintegrating one of the evil robots. The second invader launched a thermonuclear device that barely missed the Guardian and blew a hole in the store's front window.

Stanner activated half a dozen invader robots and sent them to aid their beleaguered comrade. To keep the odds more or less even he wound up three other Guardians, who immediately took

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to the air. The airborne Guardians buzzed the battle on the floor and melted the head of the invaders' chief robot, leaving him to weakly spin his radar screens.

With their leader done in, the invaders formed a single line and headed for the door. The Guardians and their frogs followed, sniping at the retreating army. The invaders poured through the hole in the front window with the Guardians in hot pursuit. Once on the street, the retreat became a rout, with invaders scattering their ranks and the Guardians rolling after them on their tread-feet to mop up. The frogs had a ball. And every time one of the Guardians, invaders or frogs crossed a traffic sensor cell, the MasterComp registered another vehicle moving past.

MasterComp definitely felt ill. An enormous traffic jam had suddenly developed on 147th Street and 232nd Avenue, moving north, but no traffic was registering previous to 147th Street. The chronometers read 4:07 A.M. but the stores were open, so the chronometers had to be inaccurate. No other traffic was passing sensor cells. Therefore the jam was a local phenomenon, possibly an emergency situation. MasterComp activated the call circuits to the National Guard and fire stations. That made it feel a little better.

By the time the first sirens stirred, Stanner was twelve blocks away, curled up on the seat of an abandoned train car rusting on the tracks of the old El. When the fire trucks and National Guardsmen arrived at 147th Street and 232nd Avenue, he was asleep.

The first firemen at the scene had nothing to report. They looked at each other blankly, trying to understand how they had been called out for a false alarm. Since only the MasterComp could call up emergency vehicles, *something* had to be wrong. The National Guard arrived, and the street filled with men armed with machine guns and fire hoses looking for something to shoot or soak. The fire chief radioed back to MasterComp that nothing was wrong.

But up in room 817 of the Stanford Heights Apartments, Emma White, victim of four fires in her eighty-seven years, heard the fire engines and panicked. She rolled to her bedside computer tie-in and typed FIRE as emphatically as she could.

MasterComp noted the entry and directed the men on the street to room 817 of the building across the street from where they stood.

The men attacked the building with all the might their training

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allowed, crashing through the great security doors and rushing up the stairs to the eighth floor. The door of 817 was open and the apartment empty, Mrs. White having fled to the room next door when trouble started. In the next room, Mrs. White prevailed upon Mrs. Stone to enter a FIRE complaint on her console, hoping at least one of their entries would get through to MasterComp.

The firemen found no fire in 817 and reported that to MasterComp. But MasterComp already had an entry from 819 that there was a fire there. Mrs. White and Mrs. Stone fled from 819 under the gaze of the firemen and headed down the stairs at the end of the hall. MasterComp told the men to check 819 and again MasterComp received a NO EMERGENCY from the firemen.

Mrs. Stone and Mrs. White reached the seventh floor and activated the hall emergency alarm. Bells and sirens went off, waking whatever tenants were still somnolent on that floor and alerting MasterComp to the problem. MasterComp in turn directed the firemen to the seventh floor.

George Blanding, who had been asleep until the emergency alarms roused him to a groggy state, heard the noise and clumping of hurrying, panicky feet and jumped to the conclusion that the building was under attack. He hit the RIOT code on his MasterComp console.

MasterComp reeled with metallic vertigo under the alternate EMERGENCY and NO EMERGENCY reports being fed into it. No sooner did it receive a call for help than a field agent said there was nothing wrong.

The whole morning had been wrong—things were happening with no logical pattern and there was no way MasterComp could anticipate what would happen next. It did not even know what time it was.

Suddenly MasterComp knew it was going to be sick.

Jehangir Bhascara flung open the door to the programming department of the MasterComp complex and pushed his short, muscular body into the office.

"Vishnu's blue ass!" he said as he stepped into the chaos. The computer was spewing reams of print-out paper into the air while making a small, mewing sound. The rest of the programming staff stood sheepishly along the walls, looking to one another to find some clue as to what to do.

Bhascara's foot tangled in a mass of paper containing the budget

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for the university's athletic department, and he pitched headlong onto the floor, his cup of coffee splashing the MasterComp and shorting out the radio, television, and newspaper subscriptions for all of South Chicago and Evanston.

One of the programmers rushed to him as he flailed in the paper ocean that covered him. "What's going on?" Bhascara bellowed as he was helped to his feet.

"We don't know," the programmer said.

"Why are you all just standing there?" Bhascara shouted, his face turning red.

"We don't know what to do. We were waiting for you to get here . . ."

"You think I know any more about this than you? Get to your positions and try to sort out as much as you can."

Everybody scrambled to his or her place and shuffled any paper nearby, punched some buttons experimentally and tried to stop the flood of print-outs.

"Sir," someone said, "there's been a riot during the night."

"A riot?" Bhascara said. "When?"

"7:27 this morning," the technician said.

"What the hell?" Bhascara said. "It's just seven A.M. now."

"MasterComp says it's almost 10:30."

Bhascara rushed to MasterComp's central visual display terminal, a great green screen in the middle of the room. He flicked on the keyboard and accessed the troubleshooting program. "What's the matter, baby?" he whispered.

MasterComp calculated the lifetime batting averages of the entire National and American leagues and decided the Los Angeles Dodgers were going to win the World Series this year.

Bhascara broke into a sweat. "No, honey. Tell me what's wrong." He typed in a request for a scan on the previous night's activities.

MasterComp poured out the whole night's frustration and confusion. Bhascara patted the terminal gently, then turned away to face his staff. Each person was at his or her assigned place, except one.

"Where's Ed?" he said, nodding to the empty terminal.

No one replied for a moment, then Lissitsky said, "He didn't show up today."

"Great," Bhascara snorted. "The whole city's falling apart and Ed's sleeping late. Find him."

Lissitsky turned to the console and punched the telephone ter-

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minal, then a few numbers. "No answer," he turned to Bhascara after a pause.

"Check with traffic control for any report on his car."

Another pause. Then Lissitsky rose and went to Bhascara, his face pained. "Traffic control has a report of Ed's car wrecked in the industrial section, with a body associated."

Bhascara winced and turned back to the VDT. "No mistake?" he said softly.

Lissitsky shook his head. "It's his car."

The office became quiet, except for the humming of MasterComp. Everyone had liked Ed; he was a good worker and loaned money freely. Lately he had been somewhat moody—even had an argument with the section chief—but that was just stress. . . .

Suddenly MasterComp bleeped crookedly and activated the city's snow removal apparatus. Bhascara frowned and turned to the terminal, adjusted a knob, and shook his head.

"We better tie into Detroit and New York's MasterComps or this city will fall apart," he said.

Alice Hopkins leaned against the dusty windowsill of the train car permanently idled in the abandoned El station. She watched the slow, methodical progress of the snow plow down the street and wondered why the plow was out in July, and finally decided she didn't care. Whatever reasons the city might have had for anything it did belonged to another world—not hers. She turned her back on the city and began scuffling her way through the ankle-deep flood of litter in the car.

Since the trains had been abandoned as a means of transportation, the cars had become a hangout for the toughs and outcasts of the city—punks, derelicts, and junkies. She liked the old trains, however, as they were the only place where a person could be alone to think, especially during the day when everyone was busy.

She continued down the abandoned car, each step crackling with discarded paper and tinkling with broken bottles, until a cacophony of rustling and thrashing beside her erupted into a human figure.

Abruptly she stopped and flattened herself against the wall opposite the outburst and watched the man in an absurd green coat and purple shirt as he stretched his arms high overhead, yawned, and looked at her with a smile. He was well, if somewhat ridiculously, dressed, and looked harmless enough.

"Hi," he finally said, after his wake-up gymnastics.

"Who are you?" Alice said, watching him suspiciously.

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"Well, I really don't know," he replied, smiling. "So much has happened since yesterday I'm not sure I can still be the same person."

"Is that a fact?" Alice said wryly, tilting her head. "And what happened that was so traumatic?"

The man in the green coat apparently did not notice the skepticism in her voice. He leaned forward towards Alice and began enthusiastically, "I was driving home from work and some kind of huge transporter smashed into my car—totally demolished it. By all rights it should have ground me into hamburger, but it didn't. I guess I really should have been killed." He paused thoughtfully, then muttered, "Maybe it did kill some part of me."

Alice raised an eyebrow. "That's a little dramatic, isn't it?"

"Life and death are pretty dramatic."

She looked at him to see if he was playing some kind of college kid's word game with her. But he just kept his half-smile and held her eyes with his steady, open gaze. That flustered her and she turned her head away. "Well, what part of you got killed?"

"Hmm," he said, and lay back down in the papers with his hands behind his head. "I'll have to think about that. Maybe you could tell me who you are meanwhile?"

Completely off his gyro, Alice thought as he stared at the ceiling of the car. He didn't seem dangerous, though. "My name is Alice Hopkins," she began, "and I'm a pilot for . . ."

"That's what died!" he shouted, bolting upright.

Alice startled backwards against the wall and nearly tripped over a piece of broken pipe hidden beneath the rubble of paper and debris. "What?"

"The function," he said. "Did you notice—it's not enough that you are Alice Hopkins, you have to add that function of being a pilot. We're all human beings, but we have to have a function to relate to other people, otherwise they wouldn't know how to talk to us." He leaned over, twisting his head to look at the spot he had just left and raised the timber of his voice into a parody of a matronly woman. " 'So you're a pilot—isn't that exciting work?' " Then back to his original position, looking at the pretend-matron. " 'Sure.' " Back to the matron. " 'Doesn't it get lonely flying all by yourself?' "

He returned to his own voice and looked at Alice. "Isn't that the way most conversations go—about your work, not you?"

Alice laughed at his straight-faced silliness. "Yeah, that's pretty much it, at least with the non-flyers."

"Well, that's what got killed in me. I saw this huge metal

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. . . something . . . coming at me and I knew that everything I had worked for was over—just like that. I don't really know anybody, and nobody really knows me. I spent six years at school and three years working my way into the MasterComp food service section, making certain everyone had hot coffee and properly toasted muffins at the break of day. And in all that time, I've never had a chance to do the things I really wanted to do. Do you know I've never even . . ." He broke off and looked at her expectantly.

"What?" Alice said, smiling with the same make-believe intensity as the man in the green coat.

"I've never even been to Mars."

"No!" she said with mock horror.

"Uh-uh. Have you?"

"Twice a month."

Suddenly the joking humor went out of his voice and his eyes widened with genuine surprise and wonder. "Really? You've been to Mars? You're not kidding?"

"No, I'm not kidding." The seriousness and urgency in his voice startled her into mistrust again. She didn't like abrupt changes of mood in strangers, especially when she was alone with them in a deserted train car.

"That's incredible," he said, jumping off the seat he had been lying on. "Mars is a special passion of mine. I've read every book ever written about it. I've even got the first photographs sent back from the surface by the Viking probe in 1975. But I've never been there. Tell me, is the sky really red?"

"Well, more pinkish, actually."

"Oh, that's great!" He began pacing up and down the car with nervous excitement. "Do you think you could get me to Mars with you on your next run?"

"Uh . . . I'm not sure I still am a pilot. I should be on my way to Mars right now."

"But you're not. On your way to Mars, I mean."

"No," she said grimly and turned away from him. "Being a pilot isn't what you think it is. There's a lot of crap you have to put up with: forms and landing permits, creepy navigators and . . . I don't know. Being a pilot to Mars isn't just being a pilot to Mars." Her confusion and anger over her own thoughts and motives spilled out onto the man in the green coat. "Anyway, what's all that talk about not wanting to be only a function? I no sooner tell you my job and you want me to stop being Alice Hopkins and

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become a pilot all for your benefit. What is that: you don't want to be a function but it's okay if everyone else is?"

His face clouded. He wrapped his arms around himself in a protective gesture and sat heavily back onto the seat. "I did that to you, didn't I? I did what I hate everybody else for doing, seeing you only as a function." He looked straight at her, straight into her and said, "I'm sorry. This is all still new to me and I'm just learning about myself."

The sincerity of the apology surprised her, embarrassed her. "Ah, don't worry about it," she said, looking away. Then she turned back to him and looked into him with the same straightness that he looked at her, and nodded. "It's okay."

His face cleared and he slapped his leg as he stood up. "Good! Then let's get out of here."

"Wait a minute. Where are we going?"

"I don't know. Have you eaten? Maybe we should get some breakfast. Or maybe we should go to the ballet." He kicked high in a grotesque imitation of a ballet dancer, raising a cloud of paper and plastic rubble from the floor.

One particular piece of metallic foil fluttered over his head and settled back into the old circuit of the train's activator switch, momentarily shorting it into a "Go" mode.

Of course MasterComp suppressed the train activity before it began with an automatic kill signal designed to keep the old trains from activating by mistake.

The kill signal was duly passed along the tie-ins. The signal meant nothing to Detroit's MasterComp since Detroit never had a mass transit system based on trains.

But New York did. And unlike Chicago, New York still used its trains.

"There're three hundred and fifty thousand people stuck in the subways and you're telling me it's because of a 'glitch'?" the mayor of New York shouted into the telephone. "What the hell is a 'glitch'?"

The figure on the telephone screen brushed back a lock of hair that fell back onto his young face. "It's an unknown, random factor. Something we can't control or foresee."

The mayor swabbed his sweating forehead with a hanky and glared at the man on the screen. "You're the best computer troubleshooter in this country, Wilson, and you don't know what the problem is?"

"So a rat chewed through a cable somewhere, so sue me. Look,

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I just found out about this five minutes ago. what do you want from me?"

"I want you to get the trains moving again."

"Ten minutes. They'll be running again in ten minutes."

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor," his secretary suddenly cut onto the screen, pushing Wilson's image into half the screen. "We have about a dozen reporters on the line asking for some comment from you about the subway breakdown."

"Tell them there will be an official statement released soon and have Peters get on it. Get the whole PR staff on it."

The secretary faded, returning Wilson to sole ownership of the screen. "Okay, Mr. Mayor, we're going to reroute most of our MasterComp's functions to Washington while we deactivate the block on the train circuits."

"How long will that take?"

"Longer, if you make me explain it to you."

The mayor nodded and said, "Go ahead."

The image of Wilson faded from the screen, leaving the mayor in the artificial calm of his office.

Three hundred and fifty thousand people in the subways, he thought. Jesus, what a mess that has to be down there. Good thing it's not rush hour.

The mayor pushed a stud on his telephone console. "Ms. Brian, get me Sam Reinfeld at City Transport and see if he can rig up an intercom system so I can speak to the people in the subways—loudspeakers or radio or whatever."

"Yes, Mr. Mayor," Ms. Brian answered and reached for the telephone file as her image faded.

They've been down there fifteen minutes already, another ten at least before the trains are moving again. . . . Why did this have to happen three months before election? the mayor thought. He glanced up at the ceiling plaintively. I was such a good lawyer, you want me back chasing ambulances?

The telephone screen crackled into life again with the face of Reinfeld in front of a pandemonium of running transport workers and minor city officials.

"Grant?" Reinfeld said above the noise of his office. "We got you piped directly into the subway cars. You'll have to shout to be heard down there. No one is being very polite, I'm told. And no video of you."

Thank God, the mayor thought. "Okay, Sam. I appreciate it."

"You're on," Reinfeld said and his picture vanished.

There was no audio input from the trains either, but the mayor

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swore he could hear thousands of angry people seething on the other end of the telephone. He took a deep breath. "Ladies and gentlemen . . ."

The president of the United States switched on his telephone and stared at the afterglow left on the screen by the absence of Donald Angus, secretary of science and technology. Then he pushed the intercom button on his console.

"Yes, Mr. President?" his private secretary answered.

"Get me the director of the FBI on the line, please, Ms. Durston."

"Right away, sir."

Again silence. Angus was an overly cautious man, the president told himself. Even so, the MasterComp problems *did* seem to be suddenly very common and very disastrous. If there was some kind of funny business going on with the MasterComps the president wanted it to end quickly. With elections only two years away and campaigning already under way, someone would come up with a reason to blame him for the computer problems. Why everyone wanted to blame him for everything that went wrong was a mystery to him.

Angus did not want to say outright that there was some kind of conscious direction behind the breakdowns, but he definitely implied that was the area for future research.

Scientists, the president thought and shook his head with disgust. Won't say a definite word until they are absolutely certain they are right. Meanwhile the whole world could collapse around them.

Finally his telephone screen came to life with the image of Ms. Durston. "The director of the FBI is on the line."

"Thank you. Patch him in."

The screen darkened for a second, then brightened with the face of William Senlac. "How are you, Bill?" the president said.

"Fine, Alex; you look pretty good yourself. How's Eve?"

"Very well, thanks."

"Good," Senlac said, pleased to be done with the formalities. Senlac was an action man—big and tough, like the old-time cops on a beat who weren't afraid to step on a few toes to get their jobs done. Actually, he would have preferred to be in the field again and not rotting behind a desk playing office politics in the capital city of politics. But a job is a job. "What can I do for you?"

"Do we have anything on computer terrorists?" the president said.

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"Three files full. Where should I begin—the People's Electric Army, the Fourth Law group, the Consumer Army . . .?"

"Who would have the knowledge and expertise to foul up a MasterComp?"

"Probably the Fourth Law people. You must be talking about the Chicago-Detroit-New York business, right?"

"Detroit?" the president said. "What's happened to Detroit?"

"Nothing yet. But Detroit is tied in with Chicago and New York."

"Well, so are we now. Angus over at S and T just called to advise me that New York and that whole string of cities has tied into our MasterComp until they can untangle the mess they are in. How did you know about this, anyway?"

"A friend of mine at the FCC asked me to look into the computer troubles in case the computer terrorists are in it."

That was the problem with computer crime—it covered so much ground, the president thought. The Department of Science and Technology, the FCC, the ICC, even the SCC, all had a hand in computers. No one could possibly keep up on what's happening in the field. Even so, the president was irritated that some anonymous flunky in FCC had put the FBI on the case before he, the president of the United States, had given the order.

"And did you look into it?" the president said with a slight overtone of anger in his voice.

"There are always a few men working in that area," Senlac replied, looking satisfied with himself for having the situation in hand without needing the order.

"Well, put a few more men on. Roust the usual suspects and see if anyone knows anything." The president allowed the irritation in his voice to bloom into overt impatience.

Damn civilian, Senlac thought; sees a few TV shows and starts to tell me how to do my job. "Right away."

"And keep me posted on that, will you, Bill?" the president said in a gentler tone, flashing his famous ingratiating smile. A little harsh, a little sweet, he thought; that's the way to keep the respect and affection of subordinates.

"Will do," Senlac said, looking neither respectful nor affectionate, and hung up.

Stanner and Alice Hopkins reached her apartment as dusk settled into the silky darkness of night. A quick elevator ride, a fumble with keys, and they were inside the impersonal warmth of her home.

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A traveler's home, Stanner thought as he walked in: just one big room with a table and two chairs, a sofa beside a small dresser with a lamp on it; on one side of the room was a kitchenette, with the bathroom on the other side. No clutter, no books, no pictures or any hint of the personality of the occupant. Probably hasn't spent enough time here between flights to settle in, he decided; nothing really here to leave if she left.

Stanner shucked off his green coat and hung it on the doorknob, hoping it would fall off and form a little human mess amid the neatness. It did.

"You go have a look at those pictures while I throw some food on—I'm starved," Alice said.

"Can I help?"

"No, no. This won't take a second; I'll just put these chops in the microwave. The pictures are in the little bureau—top left."

Stanner went to the small dresser and opened the first drawer on the left, revealing a mass of photographs scattered throughout the drawer. He recognized them—pictures of Mars.

Awed, almost reverently, he picked them up and set them on the dresser top, then reached for the switch on the lamp. Nothing happened when he switched it on.

"Hey," he called into the kitchen, "the light doesn't work."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot," she answered. "They shut it off a couple months back."

"Who did?"

"The computer people," she said through the sound of dishes being moved. "Said it was part of the conservation program."

Stanner nodded. The conservation drive. Supposed to save electricity by turning off seven percent of the lights; a fine idea, but one easily gotten around if you knew what wires to cross. "I can fix that. Where is your meter?"

"What meter?"

"The meter the meter reader reads to figure how much computer time you and your appliances have been using. You know, so they can charge you."

"Oh, I don't know. In the basement I guess."

He headed for the door. "I'll run down and rearrange a few circuits—won't be a minute."

"Don't bother . . ."

"No bother," he said, stepping out. "I used to work with those things. . . " The door closed.

Computer work? Alice thought as the door clicked behind him. He had not mentioned much about himself that day, and computer

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work was about the farthest guess she could conjure about his profession. He certainly was not anything like the computer people she had ever known through the company; they were largely careful, plodding men who were overly conscious of their clothes and manners—very careful not appear out of the norm in any way, content to take orders and translate them into the computers.

If the other crew members of the flights were sometimes creeps, at least they were human and had feelings. The computer department was just so much cold fish. Well, maybe that part of him died in the crash too, she decided.

She reached into the freezer for two orders of mashed potatoes and set them beside the chops in the microwave. Anyway, she told herself, what right do you have to come down so hard on the computer department? It must have been an exciting field before everybody went into it and there were so many people for each position that everybody had to watch what they said and did to keep from being replaced. The Mars run was once fresh and exciting. . . .

That was the biggest difference she could see in Stanner—the Mars run was still fresh and exciting to him. He had a child's love for space even yet. And he managed to make her feel that excitement again. The other computer people—most people, in fact—did not feel excited about anything, it seemed. While Stanner had spent the whole day with her getting excited about *everything*. Even just standing on a street corner eating an ice cream cone was fun with him. And the delicious sense of having nowhere to go and nothing to do was a new—no, rediscovered—feeling.

She liked the feeling. And she liked the feelings he brought out in her. The Mars run was wonderful again, to hear him talk about it; she would like to take him with her on a run, to see his face as Mars grew larger and larger on the viewing screens, to hear what he would say when they entered the touchdown sequence.

But not on a commercial trip, she decided. The most effective way to kill any feeling of wonder about the run would be to have to go through Schmidt's processing—Schmidt, with his entry forms and custom agents, his stupid jokes and leers, would shatter the excitement the first time Stanner got close enough to smell Schmidt's perpetually stinking breath. Did the old NASA program fight so hard to open space for humanity just so people like Schmidt could take over Mars?

Maybe they could hijack a liner. . . . Get out of the commercial . . .

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"Is the light on?" Stanner said, swinging the door open.

Alice glanced back to the dark corner. "No. Maybe the switch is off."

"Well, let's turn it on." Stanner strode to the dresser.

"Just a second." Alice set final instructions on the microwave and punched it on, then joined him just as he reached for the switch.

Maybe it was the last light that blew the whole network. Maybe that last, final illegal power drain was just enough to shut off all the lights. And everything else.

No one ever really knew what caused the shutdown. Beneath the facile explanations of the MasterComp Corp. everyone nurtured his own private reason. The mayor of New York seems to have favored the rat with a taste for cables. Just before his nervous collapse he managed to institute New York's most effective (and vindictive) rat eradication program. He was removed from office by the end of the week and retired to a quiet hospital for "rest" and occasional electroshock therapy.

The president of the United States felt a strange calm spread over him when the lights went out. He was just reaching for the intercom button on his phone console to ask Ms. Durston to send in some sandwiches, but the darkness cut everything off. He settled back into his chair and smiled a thin, peaceful smile. The usual shadows of trees, thrown by the ground lights, were gone, replaced by wildly careening car lights that sprayed dim patterns on the wall before him. Finally he rose and walked slowly to the window, looking over his city, and wondered idly how far the blackout extended. He had an unpleasant meeting scheduled for the morning to discuss the coming campaign—the hateful, exhausting campaign. Amazing how circumstances can eliminate the need for unpleasant meetings, he thought.

In the first fifteen minutes of the blackout, three out of every five windows were broken in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Washington D.C., and most of the cities surrounding them. Liquor stores and pharmacies were cleaned out. Pawn tickets were redeemed, even if the tickets had been forgotten. A half a dozen universities' computers had their main memory cores wiped out. Television sets went from showrooms to living rooms without even a nod at the warranties. Someone even stole a subway car in New York. And Chicago's main spaceport lost a twelve-ton private liner.

Alice knew how to operate the ship, of course. And Stanner's

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enthusiasm insured the success of the trip. Getting the ship had been simple: in the darkness and confusion they just walked to the launching pad and climbed in the first craft that suited them. The MasterComp was not needed for lift-off since ships were mostly manually operated. Without the computer to run and coordinate radar and infrared equipment, their departure was unnoticed.

They spent the three days in flight to Mars engulfed in the joy of exploration. No matter that Alice had made the run more times than she remembered, it was all new to her with Stanner constantly pointing at stars on the viewscreens. The sight of Earth left him in tears, and Alice saw the dazzling blue and white planet with the same awe that the first Mercury astronauts must have felt. It was what the Mars run should have felt like.

Alice knew they would have a problem when they got to Mars. Having left so abruptly, and in the illegal manner they had, no flight plan had been filed. Without a flight plan, the MasterComp at Marstown would greet them with a squadron of police if they tried to land without going through proper authorities, who would probably want some sort of explanation for their possession of a twelve-ton liner registered to someone else.

If Stanner was aware of their impending problem, he didn't appear worried about it. He happily meandered around their liner, exploring and touching things, enjoying whatever could be enjoyed. He seemed willing to accept whatever came their way, even if that was a prison sentence.

What did finally come their way was a mammoth, 250,000-ton cargo carrier. Alice knew of these types of transporters; stories were told about smugglers using their great bulk as a screen to hide from scanners. That kind of maneuver was very tricky, though, since the pilot of the hidden ship had to match the transporter's flight path *exactly* or risk detection. But it was their only chance.

She slipped behind the transporter's aft delta wing, and adjusted her speed to match it.

The Marstown MasterComp knew something was wrong. A C-274 cargo ship was in orbit with far more mass than such a craft could have. The C-274 type ship could have no more than 250,000 tons mass, and this one exceeded that by almost twelve tons. The ship had the proper access codes but did not fit the description of the transporter MasterComp was expecting. Eleven-point-six ex-

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tra tons. It could not be the C-274 cargo ship, MasterComp decided.

But the transporter was initiating landing procedures. It might be . . . what if . . . if it is . . . MasterComp rifled through its options and lurched toward a decision.

Six weeks later Stanner and Alice sat in a deserted restaurant, sipping coffee. Marstown was dying around them. People wandered around stunned; no cars hurried along the streets that were showing signs of decay. Lights blinked on and off without reason, trash piled up in the road uncollected, and a stream of water meandered down the sidewalk from a broken water pipe no one had thought to repair.

Stanner swallowed his coffee and turned the page of his newspaper. Earth had fallen upon hard times, it seemed; most of the United States was still without power, and Canada was also affected. Europe and Asia were in chaos. Only the less developed parts of Africa and South America were not affected by the "MasterComp Crisis," as it was called. The trouble had even reached Mars. . . .

Deep beneath the surface of Marstown, the warning Klaxon began blaring in the central MasterComp control room. Assistant city director Carl Williams startled out of a shallow nap and looked around.

"What's going on?" He grabbed at a scurrying aide.

"Number Four tunnel went critical," the aide said before disappearing into the chaos of running technicians.

Williams glanced at the open portico leading into the deep recesses of Tunnel Four, almost seeing a pulsing red glow from within it. Imagination, he told himself, and shook his head.

A junior programmer, Roberts, approached him with an armful of print-outs. "Williams, what are we supposed to do about Tunnel Four?"

"That's a decision for Taylor. Why are you asking me?"

"I can't get through to him," Roberts said.

Williams glanced at the programming chief, Arthur Taylor; he sat hunched over a terminal, fingers dancing over the keyboard, too deeply involved to notice the whirlwind around him. Williams felt relieved; Taylor was the best computer man he knew; if there was a solution to the mess they were in, he would find it.

"Well, shut down Four," Williams said. Roberts acknowledged and left.

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Four coordinated all domestic functions on the planet; all cooking circuits, water and sewer controls and security measures were run by Tunnel Four functions. Living was going to be tough on the surface, Williams knew.

For the tenth time in the last hour, Williams switched on the life-support monitors and nervously read the numbers on his screen. But, as usual, they showed no abnormality: the air, heat, and atmospheric pressure that made the Mars dome habitable were all fine. The computer and machinery that controlled life support were half a world away and unconnected to MasterComp—fortunately, Williams thought, otherwise life would be more than just "tough" on the surface.

Another programmer rushed up to his side. "There's been another crash in orbit."

"Another freighter on automatic?" Williams asked, knowing the answer before he heard it. For the last six weeks every ship that approached Mars was twelve tons overweight and MasterComp would not allow it to land. The automated freighters just locked into orbit until they ran out of fuel or crashed into another orbiting freighter. Those ships guided by living captains simply ignored MasterComp's orders and landed anyway, which created endless opportunities for smugglers.

Williams started to acknowledge the report, but another aide arrived.

"Sir, Tunnel Three is starting to overheat."

Three handled municipal functions. Williams winced at the news and looked again towards Taylor. He was still working over the computer. "Ah, cut power to the dangerous circuits and hope for the best. Even if Three goes that still leaves us two tunnels."

"Only one," the aide said. "Number Five went down while you were asleep."

Williams grimaced. "Do we have an evacuation procedure worked out?"

The aide blanched. "Yes, sir."

"Don't worry," Williams said, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's just that if there is some kind of real trouble I don't want two hundred fifty people trapped a hundred meters below the surface."

Behind them, a worried rumble went through the crowd of computer technicians and city functionaries. The room quieted as another technician approached Williams.

"Mr. Williams," the technician said.

Williams felt his stomach sink. *Mister*, no less. Must be bad. "Yes?"

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"We seem . . . MasterComp says we have . . . been invaded by a-aliens."

The whole room was utterly silent. Williams looked at the man a moment. "What did you say?"

"I said . . . well, look." He swung a visual terminal around for Williams to see. The green field of the screen slowly began filling up with grotesquely shaped spacecraft, built double-decked, or single. Suddenly a cannon appeared in the lower corner of the screen and shot a blip at the alien ships, exploding one when it hit.

"I got it!" the voice of Taylor sounded in the cavernous silence. Another blip, another explosion. "Not bad, eh, Williams? You want a shot?"

"Oh, my God," Williams said. "Get everybody out of here!" He grabbed an aide. "Start evacuating! Now!"

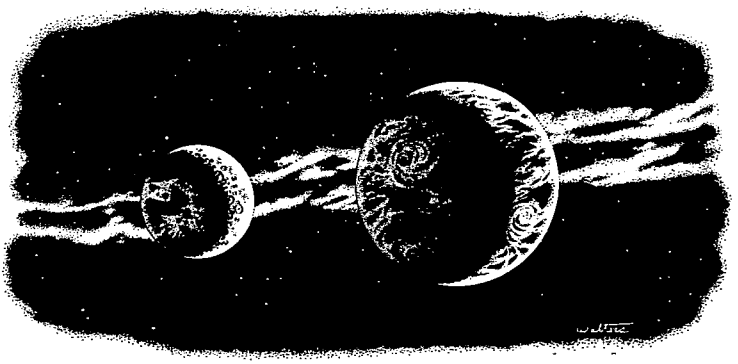
Stanner could feel the shudder of an explosion deep beneath the planet. The explosion shivered the walls of the restaurant and brought down a small section of ceiling, raining plaster around Stanner and Alice. Stanner brushed the plaster dust off a corner of the newspaper and looked up at Alice.

She was smiling slightly as she watched a group of Galaxy Guardians lead a frog brigade out of a broken department store window across the street. Impulsively he reached out and touched her wrist.

"I love you," he said.

She took his hand warmly in hers. "I love you too, dear," she said. "If you're through with that part of the paper, could I have it?"

He smiled and passed it to her. ●



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SOULSAVER

by James Stevens

The author lives in Puerto Rico with his wife Tita and his children Ian and Tara. As vice-president of Jimmy Productions, he serves as creative consultant to advertising agencies, writing, producing, and directing commercials. He made his first sale to *Worlds of If* in 1967 at the age of 22, and we hope we'll be seeing more from him soon.

art: Judy Mitchell

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Headband's tuned to some extremely righteous praise-the-Lord music. It really rocks my soul, and I'm Howie Happy. Then our dispatcher's voice cuts in to say Fabiola and I are wanted. An s.i.d. at *Caserío Madre Teresa*, the super slum-clearance project they built in 2085. Now, only three years later, it's the Island's worst slum. They say it's real Clive Claustrophobia among the poor, and I can believe it. The rest of us are already living Sammy Sardine.

With the siren yodeling, you can whip through traffic on the *elevado*, which is one of the reasons I like to pilot. But then you have to downramp to ground level and crawl through the blessed mob. Look around. Vandalized parks and playgrounds, graffitied buildings and walls. The sicksweet stink of garbage. Crippled beggars. Potbellied stickchildren. It's exasperating how slow these poor folk move aside, even when we add dispersal overtones to the siren. You see them wince at the pressure on their eardrums, but no one gets very far out of the way. As we squeeze through, they pound the sides of our Van.

Anger is a sin, but I can forgive it. It's hell to be hungry and Harvey Hopeless. There are so many of us and so blessed little to go around. Still, you can forgive, but you can't justify sin, ah? Take my mother. She was born in a project like *Madre Teresa*, but she found a way out. Which proves faith will see you through. I mean, God sees to the needs of even the lilies of the field, ah? The Lord helps those.

The apartment is surprisingly clean. Two bedrooms, housing a family of sixteen. Mommy waited till Daddy left for his job assembling living modules for a new project, packed the kiddies off to school, then sliced her wrists and bled to death in the tub. Nancy Neat.

The soulkiller's still warm when we arrive. Fabiola flips on her throat mike and starts filing her report while we work. Fabiola's very cool, very professional. The me I want to be.

"Preliminary data. Female. Mulatto. About 36 years. Self-inflicted death, type 2. Loading for delivery to *Centro San Francisco de Asís*."

We apply pressure dressings to both wounds and load the body onto the air litter. The woman's skin's gone ashen. We're steering the meat through the crowd that's gathered outside when things turn hostile.

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"Why don't you leave her dead, Bibletwister?" an angry voice hisses. "What kind of life is this to bring her back to?"

I can't spot the woman, but *that* is Jeffersonian agitprop. Okay, I get a little tense. But Fabiola and I follow orders and ignore the atheistic malcontent and the other mutterings that follow. The priest who reported the soulkiller glares at the crowd, but always the voices come from behind him.

Okay, maybe some people resent the work we Corpsmen do, but, *Cristo*, our job is just another way of honoring God's laws. *God gives man life and only God may take it*—that's the motto of the Suicide Prevention Corps of America. I believe in God and in His Instrument, the Shepherdess, and I believe the work I do is good and that in doing it I become like Jesus. My faith is strong and sturdy as a mighty oak. It's that simple.

We slide the soulkiller into the back of the Van, attach the sensors and program the cryopac. All Ricky Routine. In less than three minutes, she's frozen. We deliver the meat to the *San Francisco* center, and they slip her into the revival pipeline and run her through a battery of tests to see what needs to be restored (brain cell regeneration hurts worse than death, I hear). Then they thaw her out, repair the damage and resurrect her, good as new and ready to stand trial for her crime. Once she's atoned for her sin and been brought back into the Fold, she'll be sent home to her family. Susie Saved.

Okay, maybe I'm guilty of the sin of pride, but I feel Howie Happy knowing I helped save a soul. It's not likely the woman'll try to kill herself again, either. For most, once through the ice is enough.

Fabiola's a good Christian woman. Face scrubbed, hair pulled back severely and tied off, loose-fitting coveralls that don't show a blessed lot of the body beneath. But, hey, I know she's got large breasts. A real Betty Boobs. Whenever a fit of smogcough hits her, they strain against her uniform. The birthdate on her tag says 2/14/55, so she's 33, eleven years older than I am. But she looks younger. I'm just starting my novitiate, been with the Corps barely a month.

The weather's gone to Harry Hell. That's no exaggeration. Noontime temperatures are soaring into the middle 30s—August scorchers in early May, for heaven's sake. Weather everywhere's been changing over the past century or so, and Puerto Rico is no exception. Summers are hotter, winters colder. The Atlantic Ocean's cooled by about 2° since my Grandpa's time. Fact. Sure,

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winter pilgrims ballooning down from the frozen Mainland still find the waters of the 51st State deliciously warm, but we Islanders don't hit the surf between October and March anymore. Too Freddie Frigid. Brr.

But on a hot May day like today, hey, a cold break is more than welcome. I park the FreezeVan by a roadside stand on the Isla Verde beachfront. Aah, *piraguas*. Tamarind juice over a cone of shaved ice for me, raspberry for Fabiola. I could eat a dozen.

Fabiola's a queer fish. Doesn't talk much. A real Sally Shy. She just stands there, staring out at the brilliant blue swells. My contacts automatically darken to cut the glare. Aah, *Cristo*, it's a pretty day. The beach is an anthill of souls in bathing kaftans. You can smell the salt on the soft seabreeze, and if you look straight up, you can't even see the smog.

"What's tweaking you?" I say.

After a moment, Fabiola looks at me, kind of funny, like she thinks maybe she's better than I am. "Kids today are all like that, aren't they?" Her eyes are the color of wet tobacco, and very direct, very piercing. She looks real self-contained. I wish I could look like that, but I don't know how, so I just smile, Floyd Friendly.

"Kids are all like what?"

"You have no tact, no respect for privacy. No one's allowed to keep anything to herself."

Her voice is low and emotionless, but it hits me that maybe it's *me* she's talking about and not kids in general, and that maybe I did something to offend her.

"Hey, you looked Trudy Troubled, ah?" I say. "I thought maybe you wanted to talk. I'm a good listener."

"You must be," she says dryly. "You rarely speak. And when you do, it's in that silly kiddy slang."

"Hey, if you don't want to talk about it . . ."

"I don't want to talk to *you* about it."

Now it hits me maybe *I* should be offended, but I let it slide. That's my style and it works. You need a thick skin to survive in this crowded world. And a sense of humor. I just forget about Fabiola and concentrate on what I'm feeling. Okay, the tamarind juice is tart on my tongue, the shaved ice delicicusly cold. I close my eyes and lose myself in the sensations. Hey, it's good to be alive, ah?

Fabiola's smogcough really mangles the moment.

I didn't expect this. I find myself thinking about Fabiola a lot. I lie in bed in my tiny room off the dorm living area and spend

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hours picturing her breasts, her belly, her thighs. Real Cherry Cheesecake. Hey, but no sin. It's my wedding year and the law says go multiply and fill the earth, ah?

There's a girl in the women's dorm who has pale green eyes. Like my mother had. She has a funny way of looking at me when she thinks I'm not aware of her. The problem is, it wouldn't be proper to just go up and talk to her, and I don't know anyone who could introduce us. Dwight Dilemma.

The Shepherdess's voice speaks on my headband, all the way from the District of Christ. She has a beautiful voice—soft and breathy and full of holy strength. She warns us. The shadow of evil is falling across the land. More than ever, we faithful must beware of the Jeffersonian Rationalists and their atheistic falsehoods. She says there's secret evidence the Jeffersonians are plotting against her, so, because of the threat to God's Rule, the Bill of Rights will be temporarily suspended, in the service of Christ Jesus. Sure, the Jeffersonians'll probably go to court on it, but they'll lose. God's Rule comes before all other things.

Fabiola is a widow and lonely, I think.

We've just frozen a jumper. I don't know if he did it on purpose, but I figure that by landing on his skull and scattering his brains over ten square meters of alley, he's made it impossible for the medicos to bring him back. Mickey Mess. The first successful s.i.d. in my experience. I didn't know it could be done.

"June is for jumpers," Fabiola mutters. She has me scoop up the brain tissue in a sterile container and freeze it along with the soulkiller's body. I think it's a waste of time. Hey, this is one soul that's going straight to hell, no second chance. Davey Damned.

Why do people *do* this to themselves, ah?

Okay, we're whipping along the *elevado* headed for *San Francisco de Asís*, siren wailing, slicing through thick traffic, when suddenly I say, "Do you live alone?" Just like that. Pops out without my planning it. Eddie Extemporaneous.

Fabiola measures me with her eyes. I'm piloting and I keep my eyes on the road, but, hey, I've got great peripheral vision.

"Why do you ask?" she says.

"I don't know. Just making conversation." I cut between two sluggish hovertrucks headed for Arecibo and Mayagüez with canned goods. The big one's carrying tuna, the other processed seaweed. I like tuna, but raw. Anytime I've got a little extra credit, I treat myself to a visit to *#3 Sushi Paradise*. Sure, it

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mangles your credit, but, hey, you stop at this way station only once, ah? "I was thinking if you live alone you might like to get married again."

"To *you*?"

"It's my wedding year. Didn't you know? I'd make a good husband. I'm a Godfearing Christian and I keep the Commandments. I have other virtues."

"Why me?"

"You're the only woman I know well enough."

"My," she says dryly, "you certainly know how to sweep a girl off her feet." She coughs raggedly, recovers. "Look, we've worked together all of two months. You don't know a blessed thing about me."

"Hey, I admire your experience and professionalism. Your self-confidence. I want to be like you."

"No, you don't."

"Why not?"

"You'd be a very unhappy young man." I put the Chevyota into reverse, and she says, "Let's try to plug into the loading dock a little more gently this time, shall we?"

We dump the jumper and go back to cruising the *elevado*. I'm listening to hymns on the headband when the Shepherdess interrupts to announce that the Jeffersonian Party's been outlawed. Fabiola's staring at the mountains of the Cordillera Central in the distance. They're a smudge through the smog, even on a sunny day like this. Hey, put a lot of people in one place and, bingo, you get Big Dick Drek. Fabiola's eyes are red rimmed, and her face looks suddenly old.

"Is that a 'no', then?" I say.

"Let me think about it," she says, kind of distantly.

I nod okay, but I hope she won't dawdle. Hey, I'm raring to fulfill my Christian duty, ah?

Angela. That's the name of the girl with the green eyes. She's an acolyte of the Daughters of Mary Mother, and she works in the Bureau of Indulgences. If you've got a sin to atone for and you've got the credit, you just buy the proper indulgence and, zap, you're Peter Pure again. Angela's job is to stamp paid on your Certificate of Absolution. She's kind of like Mary Magdalene in reverse—she makes people feel good by *cleansing* them of sin.

It happens in church. Angela's acting deacon this Sunday, and when she puts the Communion bread in my mouth, zing, her fingers brush my tongue. They taste slightly salty, like raw sea

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urchin eggs. I look up into my mother's eyes and see Angela recognizes me. I'm sure that's a trace of smile on her lips. Bingo. Big question. Did she touch me on purpose?

Okay, now that she's ministered to my spirit, I figure I can speak to her. After services, I wait outside the sacristy. She wears a plain buff robe that sets off her close-cropped black hair and brown skin, and, hey, she doesn't seem surprised to see me. She's almost as tall as I am, and I'm curious as to the shape of that long body beneath the loose cloth. She looks close to my age, maybe a couple of years older.

"I'm Juan Bautista," I say.

"Hey, I know," she says. That soft voice and those downcast eyes put me in mind of Our Lady, but there's a boldness about Angela that I've never noticed in any other woman, not even Fabiola. I feel real Willie Wetdream, like when I lie in my room and picture Fabiola's thighs. "You're a Corpsman. I've seen you in your skyblue coveralls. You look real Buddy Beautiful in your uniform, like an angel of mercy."

I think maybe I should marry Angela.

Sunday duty pays double and I'm thinking ahead to Monday, when I'll apply all that extra credit to a *sushi* feast. White riceballs topped with beautiful, thick slices of raw tuna, grouper, yellowtail, shrimp, crunchy octopus, all dipped in special *shōyu* sauce. Ooh, my mouth waters. Gary Glutton.

Cristo, it's been an evil Sabbath—a half dozen s.i.d.'s in less than three hours. Six soulkillers saved. Maybe it's my imagination, but I think there are more suicides popping off. Don't people understand that God makes so many of us because He loves us so? Can't they see that the overcrowding and the harsh living conditions are a test of *our* love for Him and that the reward in heaven will be all the sweeter for our having borne the pitiless sufferings of this vale of sorrows without complaint? Hey, it doesn't take a Gerry Genius to get that, ah? It's all there, in the Catechism.

The seventh self-inflicted death is a tiny, birdlike woman. She threw herself under the San Juan-Ponce bullet train and just shredded herself. Her head rolled free practically in one piece, wearing a smiley grimace and bleeding from bruises around the cheek and forehead, but the *body* looks like it's been through a thresher. *Cristo*, what a terrible way to die. Fabiola looks real pale, but we gather up the meat in a body bag, freeze the pieces

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and turn them in to *San Francisco*. Another sinner who's slithered into Satan's embrace. Danny Depressing.

Sometimes I wonder why we bother. Let them die and good riddance. But then I remember: Am I not my brother's keeper? And I remember that no person raises his hand against himself unless he be possessed by Beelzebub, and that it is my Christian duty to try to help keep safe my brother's immortal soul, lest he fall into the clutches of the Evil One for all eternity. Do unto others, ah?

Fabiola sobs, real harsh and unexpected. It *really* mangles my nerves. We've just left the little birdwoman's head and fragments at *San Francisco*, and I keep seeing the glassy film over her wet brown eyes. Marty Morbid. Those eyes looked familiar.

"What is it?" I say. My voice isn't as controlled as I'd like, but, hey, I'm angry and, okay, a little frightened. In the six months we've worked together, I've never seen Fabiola like this.

She sobs harder, coughs painfully, shakes her head and refuses to answer. I stop at a priest's helper and wait in line to buy some sacramental wine. She takes a couple of sips and it seems to calm her, but she still doesn't say anything. I'm really upset with her, but she doesn't notice. Okay, maybe I'm being a little Sidney Selfish, but I don't think she has a right to break down smack in the middle of a shift with absolutely no explanation. But, hey, I see I can't do anything about it, so I just shut up and tune in some light gospel on my headband.

After awhile, we get a call to tend to a jumper at the Morro Bay Bridge. Fabiola huddles against the passenger door, tight-lipped, red-eyed. She looks shrunken and distant.

"You want me to request a sub unit?"

She shakes her head.

"You feel up to handling this?"

She closes her eyes and nods.

And handle it she does, very cool, very calm, very professional, even though this jumper's tried to take her baby with her. I'd like to be around when they resurrect that woman, so I could break her face.

A week later, Fabiola says, "That was my mother."

"What?" I say.

"That was my mother. Under the bullet train."

"Oh," I say. Hey, I don't know what else to say. I wonder how it feels to know your mother's in hell. My mother's in heaven. She died young giving birth to me. My father's a high muckety-muck

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in the District of Christ. He's a Celibate and he's allowed to stand in the Shepherdess's presence, which makes him pretty right-hand-of-God, I guess. He personally saved my mother's soul. He saw her dressed as the Blessed Virgin in an Easter procession and Chose her. Some of our holier men do that, pick a young girl from the gutter and minister to her spiritual needs. I've been with him only twice, though he pops up on the telly news pretty often. He said to me, "I see you take after me in your looks," and he explained why his position doesn't allow him to acknowledge me publicly or help support me. I told him I understand. I know he saved my mother and that what I feel is probably a sin, but, hey, I think he's Sammy Shit.

"Do you still want to marry me?" Fabiola says.

"I'm already married," I say uneasily. Angela and I got married the day after Beverly Bitch jumped off the Morro Bay Bridge with her daughter in her arms. I can tell the news shakes Fabiola, though at first she doesn't say anything.

"A little fickle, aren't you?" she says finally.

"Hey, Dora Dillydally, you took a long time to 'think about it', ah? Things change."

"Things change," she echoes softly, nodding.

. We drive. The silence is very loud. I can make out the soft hum of the Chevyota's flywheel. *Whizzzzz* . . . . And the purr of a Pan Am blimp swimming overhead through the smog.

I get a yen for fresh coconut water and pull off the *elevado* next to a roadside stand. The vendor plucks two pale green nuts from an ice locker, hacks off their tips with a machete and slips drinking straws into them. I give one to Fabiola. I don't know if she'll appreciate the gesture, but she takes it and thanks me. The coconut milk is cold and sweet, really refreshing. It may be early October, but the Puerto Rican sun still pounds you.

"Life wasn't always like it is now," Fabiola says. I glance at her politely. She's talking to herself, kind of Nelly Nuthouse. "When my mother was a girl, State and Church were separate by law. The Christian Alliance didn't come into power until *my* childhood." She looks at me, kind of funny. "God's Rule is hardly older than you are, though your generation is under the impression that it's always existed." She glances away, and continues softly. "It's not all it pretends to be."

I guess Fabiola's upset about her mother, but I don't like to hear anyone talk against God's Rule. I look at Fabiola as cold as I can, but she doesn't notice.

"People have always killed themselves," she says. "Usually

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because death seemed more attractive than the life they were leading. But it was never like this. Never like this. We're just one unit and we deal with 70 to a hundred s.i.d.'s a month. *One* unit, Juan Bautista. *Every* month. Think about it." She looks around unhappily. "It's a hard, harsh world, overcrowded and decaying. And the government makes it worse, encouraging us to reproduce ourselves into extinction. It's not a world people want to live in."

"You sound real Janey Jeffersonian," I say angrily.

"That's the easy way, isn't it?" she says. "Label anyone who disagrees with you 'the Devil's tool'. Then you never have to deal with uncomfortable ideas. Or what might be the truth."

"That's not the truth I know," I say stiffly. *Cristo*, I can't imagine having wanted to marry this woman. We're so totally different. I feel ashamed of the lust that blinded me to her true nature.

She sighs. "No, I suppose not. People are malleable. Young people especially so."

"If you feel this way, why did you join the Corps?" This conversation's treading on blasphemy. I feel real Nicky Nervous.

She laughs, but it sounds hollow. "I didn't always feel this way. When I joined the Corps, I thought I was performing a wonderful, holy service. Nobody's faith was stronger, nobody's loyalty deeper." She pauses thoughtfully, and takes a deep breath. "I even turned in my husband because I suspected him of anti-Christian activities." I give her a surprised look. "I was idealistic and naïve, and I thought I'd found the handle." She grimaces. "I thought I'd found the handle. I imagine I was a lot like you."

"I thought he died," I say, still Stanley Stunned.

"They made it look like a suicide, the kind they can't restore. Like they did with my mother." She coughs, and her lungs sound thick with phlegm. "That's what'll probably happen to me."

She gives her empty coconut to a poor boy. He's been watching us from a distance in hopes of getting our leftovers. He cracks the nut against the edge of the sidewalk and starts eating the rich, white meat inside. I used to be that kid.

I look at Fabiola and I'm kind of scared of her, but I don't want her to know. "Ah, *Cristo*," I say disgustedly, "Pamela Paranoid."

Suddenly, Fabiola changes. She gives me a wry smile, like we share some special secret. "What the hell, I'd think the same thing in your place. I told you I was once young and malleable, too, Juan Bautista." She looks away and sighs. The breeze brings the smell of a storm coming. "Soulsaver, save thyself," she whispers so softly I almost miss it. Then, louder, "Forgive me. It's a difficult time for me, and I'm feeling sorry for myself." She looks at me

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like there's something she wants to find in my eyes, but can't. Then, she says, as though it's only just occurred to her, "I suppose you'll report me to Father René." She doesn't sound too worried.

"No, I won't."

And I don't. Not to the squad padre. I go right to the top, to the Division Chief, Bishop Malpica. He commends me for my action. I know it's the best thing for Fabiola. They'll counsel her and help her set her life in order, and in the end she'll thank me. Greta Grateful.

What roils my belly is that I keep thinking about the crazy things she said. Because I feel like I missed something.

The following Saturday night, Angela and I are wolfing down tender, fatty *toro* at *#3 Sushi Paradise* when the Shepherdess announces on the headbands that a nationwide Jeffersonian conspiracy has been uncovered and crushed. Had it succeeded, she says, it might have meant the overthrow of God's Rule and the beginning of the Reign of the Great Satan. I feel a tremendous sense of relief—the good guys win again.

Awhile later, Angela and I are discussing the new Second Coming when I get a call on my headband from Father René. I guess he must have been a close friend of Fabiola's, because his voice keeps breaking while he tries to give me the details of her death.

Program the cryopac to freeze a body, allow it to thaw unattended, then freeze it again, and you've got a vanload of spoiled meat. That's what Fabiola did to herself. At the Academy, the cryotech told us that refreezing causes the fluids of the body's cells to crystallize and that's like taking a knife and slicing them up inside. A body that's crystallized is dead for keeps. Cathy Corpse.

Fabiola was found by a band of Avenging Angels, part of the task force that broke the back of the Jeffersonian plot. *Cristo*, Tess Turncoat. Christian gone Rationalist. Soulsaver turned soulkiller. And I never suspected. Donnie Dumb. I figured her mother's diving under the bullet train and going to hell must have really mangled Fabiola's mind, and that's why she talked so Nelly Nuthouse at the coconut stand.

For a moment, I wonder if Fabiola really killed herself or if someone made it look that way. Is her blood on my hands? I mean, I was Stevie Stoolpigeon. Uh, oh, I say. Michael Melodrama. The truth is easy to figure and it's so Connie Cliché—Fabiola lost her faith, fell in with bad company, and wasted herself. By their fruits

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ye shall know them. God is love, but betray Him and He'll stomp you.

I don't want to think about it anymore. The whole thing's just Danny Depressing, so I put it out of my mind quick as I can. My spirits need a lift, and what Angela's telling me does just that.

There was a lot of hubbub around the end of the last century that Christ would return come the second millennium. But the year 2000 came and went and the world kept right on ticking. A lot of people were disappointed. Now, Angela tells me, government theologians working at the seminary in St. Paul have finished a major biblical research project that proves that past calculations were based on faulty translations that threw off the results by a whole blessed century! Minnie Mistake, ah? The true Millennium will take place at the stroke of midnight of December 31st, the Year of Our Lord 2099. In my lifetime. Fact. The official announcement is due out this week.

On that day, all the dead—everyone who ever lived, from Adam to the present—will be resurrected for the Final Judgment. And then the righteous shall be glorified and the sinful banished to eternal flame.

"You'll be just 33 years old on the Last Day, baby," Angela says in a suddenly awed whisper that gives me goosebumps. "Exactly the same age as Jesus when He died . . ."

We think about that for a minute. Exactly the same age as Jesus. For eternity. *Cristo*, that seems real important. It can't be just Calvin Coincidence.

My throat clogs and I cough several times. This smogcough I'm developing is really annoying.

Hey, there are other similarities. I save souls. I help raise the dead, ah? "You work miracles," Angela whispers. I like the sound of that. Like my namesake, John the Baptist, I bring souls to God—he through water, I through ice.

"Think about it," Angela says. "The Day of Resurrection. You . . . and *Jesus*. . . !"

I squeeze her hand. My belly knots up like when she and I begin to make love. And my heart starts to pound. I'm one with God and, bingo, I'm Howie Happy!

Fabiola blew it. But not me. I found the handle. ●

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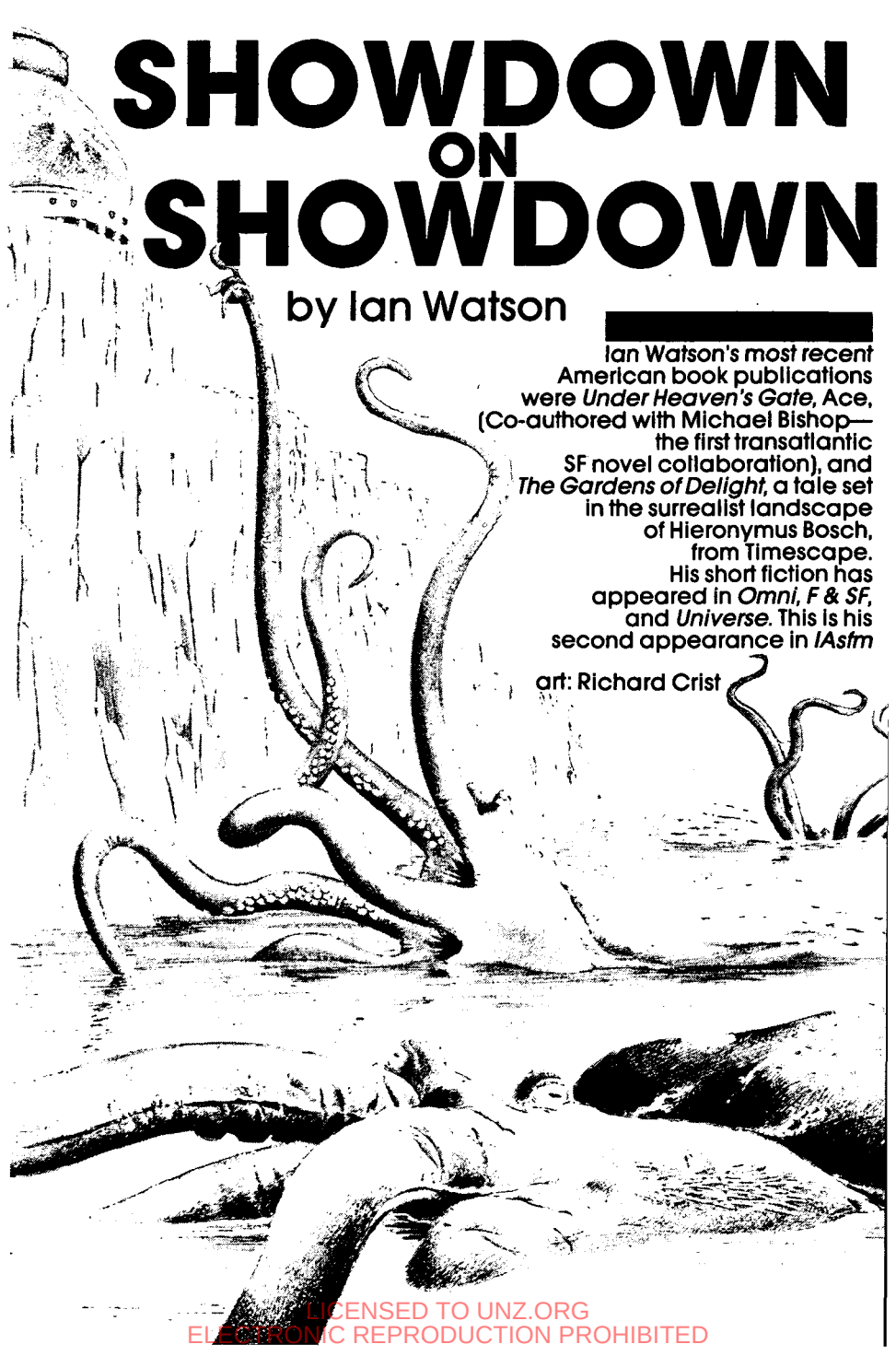
SHOWDOWN ON SHOWDOWN

by Ian Watson

Ian Watson's most recent American book publications were *Under Heaven's Gate*, Ace, (Co-authored with Michael Bishop—the first transatlantic SF novel collaboration), and *The Gardens of Delight*, a tale set in the surrealist landscape of Hieronymus Bosch, from Timescape. His short fiction has appeared in *Omni*, *F & SF*, and *Universe*. This is his second appearance in *IAsfm*

art: Richard Crist



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The miracle that saved me from madness in my survival capsule in the deeps between the stars represented odds that no gambler would ever have accepted. A trillion to one? Who could even calculate it?

The quasi-mass detectors of the Highspacer *Euclid* noted, momentarily, the faint echo of my capsule adrift in Low Space. The Highspacer dropped back down into the ordinary continuum two lights short of its goal of Eta Cass, the forbidden system of Ruby-Hoyle, and fished me in to human society once more.

Since the explosion of the Highspacer *Herschel*, I had spent nine months pitting my wits (and staking my sanity) on chess with the mini-comp, and on all the varieties of solitaire I could remember: Klondike, Canfield, Golf, Spider—and Napoleon at St. Helena, this last being the variety that Napoleon reputedly played to while away his last exile. I too, though no Napoleon, had met my Waterloo and was in exile, perhaps forever.

The peculiarities of the *Euclid*—the sense of oddity—I attributed at first to my own nine months' estrangement from human society. There was the lavish Games Room *cum* Casino that I thought I glimpsed: surely a fantasy distortion, a projection of my own late lonely rituals? There was the intent preoccupation of the crew, as though they were playing some sort of telepathic chess with each other. And there were the exhaustive mind-tests administered by psychofficer Rosamundi Bjornson almost as soon as I was brought aboard (instead of a slap on the back, and congratulations on my deliverance).

But then Rosamundi Bjornson led me to Highcaptain Wang's cabin.

The Chinese Highcaptain regarded me with prim anxiety, well masked but not entirely. (I was hypersensitive to human faces after my time in the void without them. By enhancement of my own trade-agent's skill at reading unwitting expressions now every faint rictus even of a tight-stretched Chinese face seemed magnified a hundredfold, cartoon-like.)

"I am so happy to hear you are sane, Mr. Cortina," he said by way of greeting. "We could not, of course, leave a distress beacon unheeded, but even so . . ." He let a hint fade away, that circumstances might have required that I be tucked back into my pod and jettisoned—or euthanased. "I am happy, too, to hear of the manner in which you occupied your time while shipwrecked." (Was he being sarcastic? No . . .) "I would dearly love to place you under arrest for violating the forbidden space we are now moving into. However, all of a ship's complement must play a role in the

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Hoyle system to dig us out of the mess our first expedition thoughtlessly got us into. That is how things are. Sit. Drink," he ordered sharply, in a high-pitched voice.

Drinks appeared from the dispenser. Little cups of burning mao-tai, Chinese brandy.

"How much do you know about Hoyle?"

"It's the brighter of the two suns of the Eta Cass binary. I've heard rumors that it's got two or three habitable worlds with intelligent aliens on them. Maybe that's why the system's off limits?" I searched my memory for some celestial facts. "Hoyle's a star like Sol. It's named after a twentieth-century astronomer."

"*It is not.* That is a convenient coincidence. The truth about Hoyle's human name—dreamed up by the fancy and folly of the first expedition—is that it is named after a certain Edmond Hoyle, who lived from the late seventeenth to late eighteenth centuries."

"Hoyle's *Rules of Games*!"

"Precisely. The human names of its planets, three of them inhabited and a further one terraformable, as frivolously selected by the first expedition, are Chip, Pair, Flush, Showdown, Straight, and Jackpot."

I coughed as the mao-tai caught in my throat. Rosamundi Bjornson regarded me unsympathetically.

"To give them their due, the first expedition chose appropriate nicknames. Chip is just a chip of hot rock, and Pair is number two—big, but hot and airless." Wang paused.

"Showdown is . . . where it's all happening?" I guessed wildly. "Between Flush—and Straight? For the Jackpot?"

For the first time Captain Wang smiled. "Very acute, Mr. Cortina. There is hope for you. Though you don't yet know *what* is happening. . . ."

And he told me.

"Three intelligent species co-exist in the Hoyle system, inhabiting Flush, Showdown, and Straight. Both Flush and Straight possess space travel on the interplanetary level. Straight is a cold, ice-girt world of low mass with spindly six-limbed hairy natives that look like dancing spiders with a couple of legs missing. The dominant species of Flush, a heavy, hot world, are six-limbed too, but burly and scaly like golden pangolins who stand upright. Showdown, however—in between the orbits of Flush and Straight—is a water world with only a few crests of land peeking above the deep world-ocean; its dominant lifeform resemble giant squid. *Very* giant squid: krakens. They communicate by light

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signals at close quarters, and at a distance by a kind of modulatable empathy, a sense of their placement around the globe.

Dominant species, did I say? Already we are going haywire. No one is dominant in the system, as such. In fact, the Spidermen of Straight and the Pangolins of Flush are forever playing an intricate game between their two worlds—without war, without aggression or killing. They play it for stakes of territory on little Marslike Jackpot. The actual moves in the Game are enacted for them three-dimensionally throughout the world-ocean of Showdown—by the Krakens. Showdown is the games board; the Krakens are the willing pieces, and umpires. What *their* motive might be in turning their world into a games board, we have no idea.

The Game has been going on for a very long time, though in recent E-decades the play has extended to take in Janus too: the solitary 'double atmosphere' world of the companion star Ruby, a world with primitive lifeforms of different biologies in both its hemispheres. Its territory is also contested now, far from Janus itself, in the oceans of Showdown.

"But how does that affect us?" I asked.

"The first expedition got involved in the Game. Maybe they thought they'd dropped into a Las Vegas of the sky."

"So what's wrong?"

Captain Wang stared at me with a pained expression. "The fools lost us Ganymede, Mercury, and Luna. To the Krakens, as stakeholders for the Game. They lost us the Moon, man. The Moon."

For a moment I too stared at him. Then, of course, I burst out laughing. Oh, they were marvelous. They'd been leading me along all this time. Cruel to a spacewrecked castaway, I suppose! But perhaps it was intended therapeutically. Perhaps I was showing signs of alienation, and needed a gigantic dig in the ribs.

Neither Wang nor Rosamundi followed suit, though. And the Highspacer *Euclid* was indeed fitted out with a kind of casino . . .

"That's unenforcable," I said. "It's utter nonsense. These Spiders and Pangolins don't have space navies, do they? You said they don't fight."

"They don't. But then, neither do we."

"They haven't got any way of *getting* to Sol system! And even if they could—well, I mean, Spidermen or Pangolins or Giant Squids dropping in on the Moon to collect rent! It's a fantasy. A joke. Why are you treating it so seriously? Surely they realize that you can't play board games with *worlds?*"

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"But these aliens do. They play on Showdown, for Jackpot and Janus—and whatever any visitors choose to stake."

And then I saw the flaw—or read it in their faces.

"You're afraid that you'll spark off an interplanetary war between Straight and Flush if you back out? You'll have kicked the board over. Straight will beat up Flush, or the other way about. You'll have destroyed an intelligent species. Yes, I see, instead of playing they'd do it for real! Tear each other to pieces."

"We're glad you're quick on the uptake," said Wang. "Yes indeed, we might trigger the mutual annihilation of two intelligent species who have found a crazy *modus vivendi*—a way of getting on together—and possibly even the trashing of Krakens by themselves. We have to *win* our way out of this Game—and win it in such a way that we don't win: one inch of Jackpot, one centimeter of Janus."

"Of course, there's a further problem," added Rosamundi. "War greatly stimulates technical advances. If the Game turns into a war, Straight or Flush, or maybe both, will be hugely optimized technically. We're going to drive the winner into Highspace—we've shown them it can be done—and we're going to rue it, because they'll *own* Luna and Mercury, according to their rules. Preposterous as it is, we'll have to build up a defense force ourselves. That'll ruin everything. We'll poison our souls."

"Surely this game will have to come to an end some day? There'll be the same problem. Put up or shut up."

"It wouldn't go interstellar, Mr. Cortina. That's what the risk is now."

"So get yourself down to the casino," ordered Wang, "and limber up your wits. Everyone has to be in this, according to the umpires. The rules of the Game we'll hypno into you presently. But you can regard it as something like planet-wide, role-playing Go in three dimensions with spherical topology. The number of possible plays five ahead at any moment vastly exceeds the number of electrons in the universe. We play," sighed the Captain, "highly intuitively. With WorldGov's blessing. We play, not for Luna, but for the survival of two or three alien species—and for our souls, as Bjornson says."

He raised his hand as though blessing me. But he was only waving me from his cabin.

Touchdown on Showdown: on a single island in blue ocean, up in the northerly temperate zone. No other land is visible. Our nearest neighbors—excepting the Krakens—are the Spidermen

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up at their Arctic station two thousand klicks further north. The Pangolin station is on the equator, round the other side of the world from us.

The tiny nugget in the ocean swells into a cratered, eroded peak with skirts of lichen green and a thin ribbon of cliff-high coastal plain. Where a subsidiary crater has collapsed into the sea is a deep wide bowl-like harbor; that is the harbor of the Krakens. Above, is the Earth station.

It is another kind of marooning for me: a marooning with forty other people, true . . . but it bears a resemblance. It bears a resemblance.

So then, in the harbor roosts a shift of half a dozen enormous Krakens, like tentacled submarines at anchor. [Beware those tentacles. They can reach all the way up the cliff and sometimes do so, toying with the rock, stretching themselves—it seems—during the relative immobility of duty; or are they perhaps idly exploring the rather rare (to them) sensation of solid surface—the grain of the board which Spidermen and Pangolins and Earthfolk alike inhabit? We do not expose ourselves in the open.] The Krakens' oval purple eyes watch underwater com-screens—installed by Spider work teams. Their phosphor-mantles pulse color mosaics at the sensors around the screens. An interfacing of Hoylish decoders displays the changing state of play up in the Games Room, on the crater lip, as symbols in ranks of curved viewing tanks arranged in the shape of a great globe. We sit at our input consoles on tiers around this globe, like Olympian gods or perhaps like so many personified signs of the Zodiac brooding down upon a world. As do the Pangolins and Spidermen in their own stations. We are surveyed by Hoylish vid-eyes—tiny ornithopterous sensors flitting about like flies—for infringements of the Byzantine rules. The vid-eyes feed down by radio to a multiscreen in the harbor, watched by a Kraken amidst its other duties; Krakens have a pretty awesome channel capacity for information.

A million dots, red, white, and green, pulse in the viewing globe: the placement of the Kraken players skirmishing and wrestling notionally in the seas of Showdown—thickening, thinning, pincering, probing, massing into arabesque formations, three-dimensional patterns which my pre-hypnoed brain almost, but never quite, grasps.

I sit on tier three, above the eastern quadrant of the Northern Hemisphere, scanning my pieces. Real-time play is fairly slow,

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but not as slow as I'd imagined—and far subtler. By the rules, we aren't allowed a pattern-seeking computer.

This is all a terrible fantasy! Krakens have no power over us—apart from the addictive compulsion of the Game—yet here we are ceding chunks of real estate in our own solar system eighteen light years away. And if we renege or back out we'll cause a war that could wipe out one, two, or three species—and reap the whirlwind of that war ourselves. Yet if we go on playing, the Spidermen or Pangolins—or the Krakens as stakeholders—will some day *own* us, in some abstract way. And one day they may, just may, come to collect. Which, of course, they won't succeed in doing—because the whole idea is ludicrous—yet a splinter will have entered our souls once more: the splinter of defense, a military.

All we know is that if someone from the other side of the world steps into your backyard and says "I own it," however ridiculous it is, fierce ancient territorial reactions are going to be triggered, subtly altering the parameters of human society for the worse. Once you start building precautionary Highspace warships you might just start using them. How indeed do you train a military arm—unmilitaristically? Whence comes their *esprit de corps?*

Time to begin reinforcing a salient . . .

"Player Cortina," I voice into the record. "Am staking zone two of Io, moon of Jupiter." Much good may it do them to win part of Io, a moon they knew nothing of . . . until our first expedition blithely told them all the moons and worlds we hold. I have to stake rather a lot of Io on a trivial move because Io is so bloody useless and dangerous. I could stake a couple of square klicks of Earth, instead; but WorldGov won't let us.

"Rosamundi?"

Euclid, of course, changed hands—and captains too—when we relieved the previous team. Another helpful rule. So here is Captain Wang, and Rosamundi Bjornson too. Rosamundi and I have time for a little gossip—overheard by a roving vid-eye—as we snatch an automated meal . . .

"Mr. Cortina?"

(*I love you. I'm your wild card. I'm the joker who jumped into your pack from the void* . . . Do I really love you? It's madness! I've merely imprinted on you, like a duckling newly hatched from the egg of my survival capsule . . .)

"Is this *travel?* I haven't even *seen* a Pangolin or a Spiderman except on screens—and I daren't go down to see the Krakens!

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We're on the outside—utterly on the outside of things. We're outsiders! Locked up *inside* this station like some kind of topological joke—in a goldfish bowl rotated through Highspace so that the outside is the inside."

She watches me circumspectly. Is the goldfish bowl of my own mind cracking? Is water dripping down my face? No, it's just sweat, that's all. A sweat of love.

"I wonder whether there could be some higher arbitrating power in the universe—some court of cosmic appeal—that could conceivably rule in favor of the Pangolins or whoever is owning Luna? Some superbeing that could swoop down out of the Magellanic Clouds and hand over the title deeds? Having first written them, of course!" The notion of title deeds to moons and worlds so amuses me that it is only with difficulty that I avoid breaking up.

Rosamundi eyes me warily. "Consider, Mr. Cortina—"

"Victor, please. Call me Victor."

"Actually, Mr. Cortina, as you might have guessed by now your first name is one reason why Wang kept you on the *Euclid*. Gamblers need a spot of luck. What better luck than stumbling upon a man named Victor in the middle of the void? But it's such bad luck to articulate your luck, don't you think? Like telling a wish when you snap the wishbone. So I think I'll call you Mr. Cortina, if you don't mind."

"So I'm just a mascot." (Bitterly—full of self-pity.)

She shrugs. "Also a player. Now consider: we have no idea how the Krakens achieved their twin role of umpires and pieces in the Game. Their culture—if that's the word for it—is hidden by miles of water. We don't even *know*, Mr. Cortina, that the state of play represented in the view-tanks bears any relation to what the Krakens themselves are actually doing! Are one million Krakens *really* cruising the ocean at all those co-ordinates, or are they just simulating it? Perhaps they really *are* devious superintelligences."

(Ah, your bright red hair, Rosamundi! The blood courses through my veins when I see you. And you cannot call me intimately by my name, or it would spoil our luck!)

She fans her hands: a hand of cards. Long slender tactile fingers . . . they will never touch me. She wears several synthdiamond rings, and nailpaint the same color as her hair. Red diamond fingers, a suit of ten. Unheartlike fingers. Heartless.

"They may be stakeholders—but they can't set a tentacle on dead, dry Jackpot."

"Maybe it's like the collector who has his treasures locked up in a bank vault which he never visits? He knows he owns them.

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He masturbates over the knowledge. The knowledge is important, that's all. The fact that the Pangolins and Spidermen *seem* to be the territory-collectors is the really clever part. They aren't, no matter what the state of play seems to be. They're both on a winning streak. But in the end the bank always wins. They've banked Jackpot and Janus. Maybe in the end they'll have to start staking bits of Flush and Straight, then the whole damn shebang."

"It doesn't sound like superintelligent conduct to me. It sounds plain dumb."

"No doubt a rabbit watching a human swing a golf club to wham a little ball into a hole would think it was pretty dumb, if it could think so much. But actually, compared to the rabbit's 'sensible' activities, the golfer is superintelligent—in a context of ritual behavior. Who knows how the superintelligent might amuse themselves?"

I nod at the hovering vid-eye. "Maybe they amuse themselves by watching us try to figure this out? What does WorldGov think of the superintelligence idea?"

"Not much. They're mainly worried about us triggering war and genocide—and the aftermath. Plus the slight nuisance of bunches of aliens nominally owning bits of the solar system."

"The Game's hollow. Hollow," I moan. (Moans of love for Rosamundi, whose diamonds trump my heart.)

She pats my hand—at last! "It gets to us all. But we have to persevere."

The vid-eye loses interest in us and drifts away, disappearing through an air duct.

Yes, the game is hollow—but nobody has ever played it *from the inside of the hollow!*

Down to the Games Room go I, awakened by buzzer, haunted by hollowness, unfulfilled by Rosamundi's love. I shall do something grand—a knight tilting at a dragon. I am holding a black box.

I clap my hands for attention.

"I've decided to play *inside* the sphere. I'm going to roll a viewtank out of the assembly and operate my pieces from inside." Modestly, I display my black box. "I want to see the state of play from inside out."

"That's a bright idea," says Wang. "In fact, that is one hell of an original idea. But—"

"If you're worried about the isolation factor, I already spent

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nine months playing solitaire in a pod that was pretty much like a sense-dep tank by the end of the experience!"

Matsumoto, the second officer—a black belt or something in Go—searches his hypno-memories of the rules. "There does seem to be a loophole here."

"Sure there's a loophole," I grin. "It's in the center of this view-sphere, that's where."

There is even a round of applause. Of course, I haven't told them the second part of my plan . . .

Around me the viewtanks of the waterworld, now concave, scintillate with a million sparks of red, white, and blue. My chair swivels, rocks, powers up and down. My own particular screen is tagged with gold tape to remind me which it is.

I'm in the survival pod again, alone in the void, playing for my sanity. But not *quite* alone: a vid-eye hovers, ornithopterically, behind me—always keeping behind me. A guy could go crazy locked in a room with a fly. But this is a discreet fly. It keeps out of the way and never buzzes, though I fancy—I fancy—it is inching closer to the back of my head.

I scan the pattern in all directions. Damn it, I still need eyes in the back of my head.

"Player Cortina," I voice into the record. I rap out a whole series of plays, to build my network of Kraken-pieces (if they're there at all, at the co-ordinates!). "Am staking subcrustal Luna, 5 klicks to 10 klicks depth."

"Hey," cries my earphone, "we've already *lost* Luna, dummy."

"Can't you hear? I'm staking *subcrustal* Luna. We've lost the surface, but who says we've lost the interior?"

Somebody is scrabbling at the outside of the tanks. I see the ghostly shape undulating through the sparks of play, like the shadow of a Kraken rolling in the depths.

"*Reminder!*" comes a synthesized umpire voice. "*No player may be removed during the course of the Game by force majeure.*"

The scrabbling ceases.

And my pieces begin to shift position ever so slowly in the tank, jetting streamlined through the sea at three or four hundred klicks per hour. The Krakens have accepted my stake. It's all legit. Looney legitimate! You can stake the insides of worlds. This is a whole new dimension indeed!

Rosamundi purrs in my earphone. "Mr. Cortina . . . *Victor,* you must stop. This is a very delicately balanced game. You've just

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unbalanced it almightily. That isn't *fair.*" So the fair Rosamundi appeals to my better nature, does she?

I swing round in my seat, rocking it up and down in a sine curve like a satellite track orbiting the interior of a world rather than the space around it.

"You've destroyed the whole rationale of the Game, Victor. Perhaps you can withdraw your moves and your stake, if you appeal to the umpires personally?"

Actually, I am on the point of winning us back a few million square klicks of the *surface* of the Moon. I'm Victor, after all.

Wang's voice cuts in. "The Pangolins and the Spidermen have both just protested most hotly. The Game is about territory. They can't occupy stretches of the *interior* of Jackpot."

"The Krakens are allowing it!"

"Because it's never arisen. Only a madman would think of . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Cortina, I take that back."

"If not a madman, then a genius?"

"If you like. But listen, this is a conflict-*prevention* game. *Please* request your moves and stakes withdrawn."

"I'll *discuss* it with the Krakens. That's all."

"Good man," coos Rosamundi.

I push a blue button, which lights up—interfacing through Hoylish equipment down to the lightshow in the harbor.

"Umpires, I am staking *interior* surfaces. Please confirm that this is permissible?"

There is silence for a while. Then I get my synthvoice reply.

"It is permissible, because it is not specifically prohibited. But to compensate for your internalization of the Game, you must now provide a corresponding externalization capacity for the other competitors. You have opened a gateway to the insides of worlds; now you must open a gateway to what lies outside of the space occupied by worlds. For the sake of balance you must provide an entrée into Highspace for the other competitors."

"*What?*"

"This, upon penalty of forfeiting the entire planetary surface of the Earth. You will still, of course, retain the interior below a depth of five kilometers."

The blue button winks out.

There's a lot of shouting outside the sphere of viewtanks now. Shouting for my blood. My God, they sound as though they've gone berserk out there. We don't really *have* to forfeit the Earth . . . I mean, it's all a game. I think I'll let them cool down

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for an hour or so. Or would it be better to get it over with soon? Before positions get hardened?

Of course, WorldGov expressly prohibits the export of High-space travel technology. So Captain Wang has little choice in the matter. Now the Earth is gone, from shore to shining shore. Down to a depth of five kilometers. (Do we still own the Marianas Trench and the Tuscorara Deep? No. The five klick depth follows the contour lines of the solid surface.)

I was pretty worried when I emerged, into the midst of the lynch mob. Even dear Rosamundi was baying.

Court martial me and shoot me? Tear me limb from limb?

Neither of these. Worse, far worse. They *have* all gone insane.

"Five years' work ruined!" Wang screamed at me. "By a piece of void flotsam!" They don't care about any umpire penalty now, for removing a team member. Not with the Earth gone.

I still wouldn't have believed it possible.

They're going to sacrifice me—to the Krakens. They're going to feed me to one of them.

And they proceed to do it.

Two robos hustle me out naked, bar a loincloth and an air pressure mask, from the Station and frog-march me to the edge of the cliff. A third robo abseils down the face of the cliff, twenty, thirty meters. And I am lowered, to a tiny ledge. My ankle is chained to a ring, driven into the rock. If I try to bend over to test the strength of the chain I'll tumble headlong. Either the chain will snap, dropping me into the harbor, or I'll hang here upside-down.

The robo abseiler doesn't make it back to the top. It falls past me, narrowly missing dislodging me, and splashes into the waters where the great shapes lurk, alerting them. I'm sure its fall wasn't deliberately contrived. I'm sure my dear friends would prefer me to have to wait a long time at this dizzy height—time to brood upon my crime—sunburnt by Hoyle, staring madly at the blue horizon or else squinting down my nakedness towards the pack of living submarines with their long, long suckery flails wafting like anemone tentacles far below.

Presently one tentacle quests upwards, higher and higher. It fumbles at the outcrops and ledges, feeling along them. Another tentacle follows it up. A third. A fourth. All six. Oh God, oh cosmic meta-intelligences (if there are any of you), save me.

The Kraken's head breaks surface. Its purple eyes squint up-

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wards. Can it see me, up here in the air? Between its suckers is a maw, a black hole.

The tip of the first tentacle reaches my ankle. Wavering, it creeps up my leg.

I suppose I scream and scream and kick and try to tear free, heedless of falling. The tentacle loops around my chest. It holds me firm. A second tentacle probes my ankle, then the chain. It tears the ring piton out of the rock. My knees buckle.

And I am hoisted out from the cliff. I am borne down towards the water, towards the purple eyes, the maw. The Kraken's mantle is phosphorescing wildly across the spectrum, underwater and above too. It sings a color song of appetite.

Coiling back, the tentacle holds me up before its eyes. The purple ovals stare at me. Oh let it bite my head off! Let this be a fast death. Anything but slowly stifling and dissolving in its stomach, in the darkness.

Suddenly it whisks me up and away from its maw. The tentacle bears me higher, higher, up through the air! Another tentacle snakes up alongside it, wavering beside me.

Extending incredibly, it hoists me over the lip of the cliff and sets me down on my bare feet. The crushing coil around my chest . . . slackens. It frees me. It whips away. The second tentacle hovers above me briefly. Very gently it pats me on the head—the way you pat a puppy.

I stumble back to the station—where else can I go?—highly unsure of my reception.

But Rosamundi meets me on the other side of the pressure doors and throws a towel around me, as though I am a racehorse back from a brisk canter.

The others are waiting for me. Perhaps shame-faced is too strong a word. A sense of chagrin shows, let's say.

After glancing around to confirm that, for once, there is no vid-eye about, Captain Wang breaks the ice—as though he has not just recently allowed his crew to hang me up as bait.

"You'll never guess what friend Kraken pulsed while he was hoisting you, Mr. Cortina."

"I don't suppose I will. I don't think I'll *guess* anything ever again, Captain. Do we have to play guessing games now?"

"He—or she, or it—said this. Quite poetic, but maybe that's in the translation . . .

'A ripple in the water;

'A man upon the cliff—

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'Redemption.
'The offer of his own self
'To pass within my self
'Erases the internalizing of the Game.
'Now Earth is other than a stake.
'Play resumes, at the earlier stage.
'Thank you.' "

"I wonder how they can have the concept of honorable sacrifice?" asks Matsumoto.

"Ah, they don't really," says Wang. "They have a sense of symmetry. It thought that Cortina sacrificed himself *symmetrically*. Inside the Kraken's belly, to balance the insides of worlds. Two insides cancel out. I suppose swimmers in deep seas need a deep sense of symmetry in three dimensions. Pressures within, pressures without, and so on. It's what the whole Game's really about—balancing off. Flush against Straight. I suppose we represent a three-body problem for the Game . . . Which corresponds to something very basic to the Krakens' minds. The Krakens are our pieces? Hell, no, we're *their* pieces. I've suspected for a while that Flush and Straight have both *won* the Game, maybe many times—and started playing all over again. Obsessively. Best of three. Best of five. Or the Krakens slid them into a new game without their being able to realize it, by right of umpire! The Krakens don't want Earth or Luna or anywhere, for themselves or for their players. They want symmetry. We're their poem, their song. Their art form. As are the Pangolins and Spidermen."

"It must have been bloody boring for them before Flush and Straight achieved space travel!" say I.

"Isn't it odd, though," remarks Wang icily, "that the Spiders and the Pangolins are both six-limbed creatures? Who would dream up intelligent land dwellers with six limbs, except something that had six limbs itself? Six tentacles, for example. They'd expect there'd be a terrible fuss balancing on less than four legs—if they'd never seen it done."

A chill descends on the room. "Wouldn't it be a very singular situation," he continues, "if the Krakens had *designed* the Spiders and Pangolins, with a genetic vector to come to Showdown to play the Game? And continue playing it?"

I can see the flaw in that. "The Krakens would have needed space travel. A marine species can't have space travel. They can't *build* things. Anything."

"Then how can the Krakens conceive the heavens at all? Stars and moons and worlds ought to be meaningless to them. Maybe

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there's some other way through space. Some other way of establishing connections between space-time loci . . . If you brood about it long enough. If you play games with networks, spatial patterns, dimensions." Wang waves his hand in the direction of the Games Room. "Speaking of which, enough of this intermission. We're getting seriously behind. Mr Cortina, kindly resume your place. And the rest of you."

"What! But just an hour ago—!"

"I hope it has been a salutary lesson. At least all is well again. You have undone the harm you caused. I think I shall reward you. After our tour of duty, I will recommend your secondment for a second tour."

But today, only twenty-four E-hours later, a Highspace signal from WorldGov informs Wang and all of us that a fleet of giant squidlike creatures is cruising the Pacific Ocean of Earth east of Australia. These bear a startling resemblance to the Krakens of Showdown. Some of them seem to be sick from the salinity of the terrestrial water, but they forge ahead regardless. WorldGov is most uncertain what to do about them. If they *are* Krakens, how did they get to Earth except through some dimensional gateway of their own devising deep in their own ocean . . . a gateway devised by superintelligence? Does one argue with superintelligence?

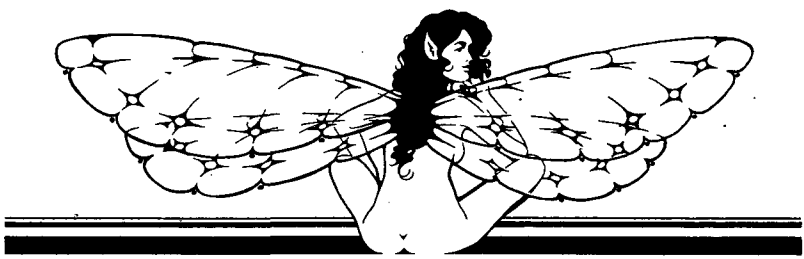
At least I know what the Krakens are doing.

Earth isn't a stake any longer. Earth is a new gamesboard.

The Krakens are surveying their new board. ●

Author's Note

The planetary system in this story was devised by Harry Stubbs (Hal Clement) for the Galileo's Worlds *project, and is used with grateful acknowledgement.*



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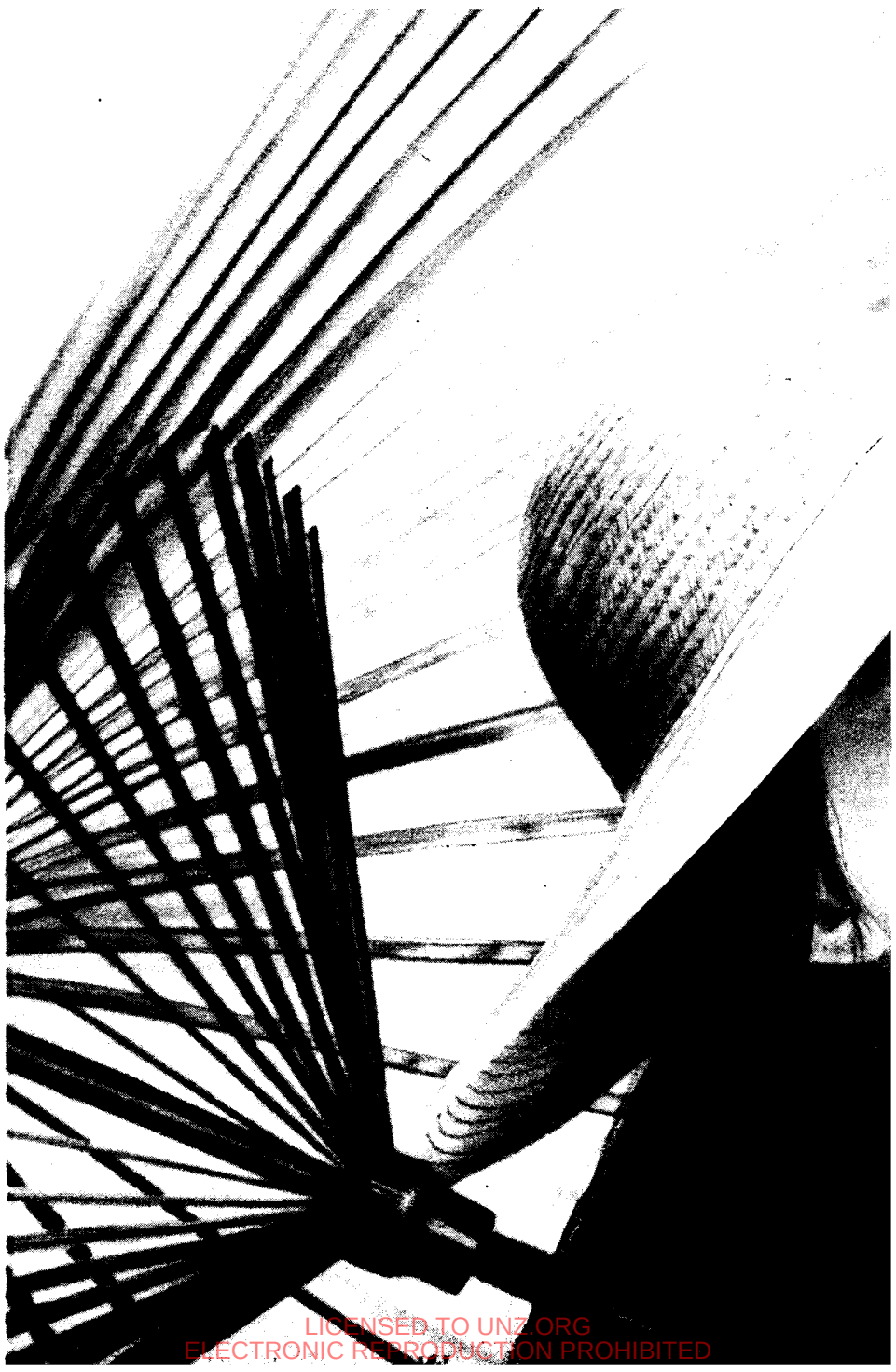

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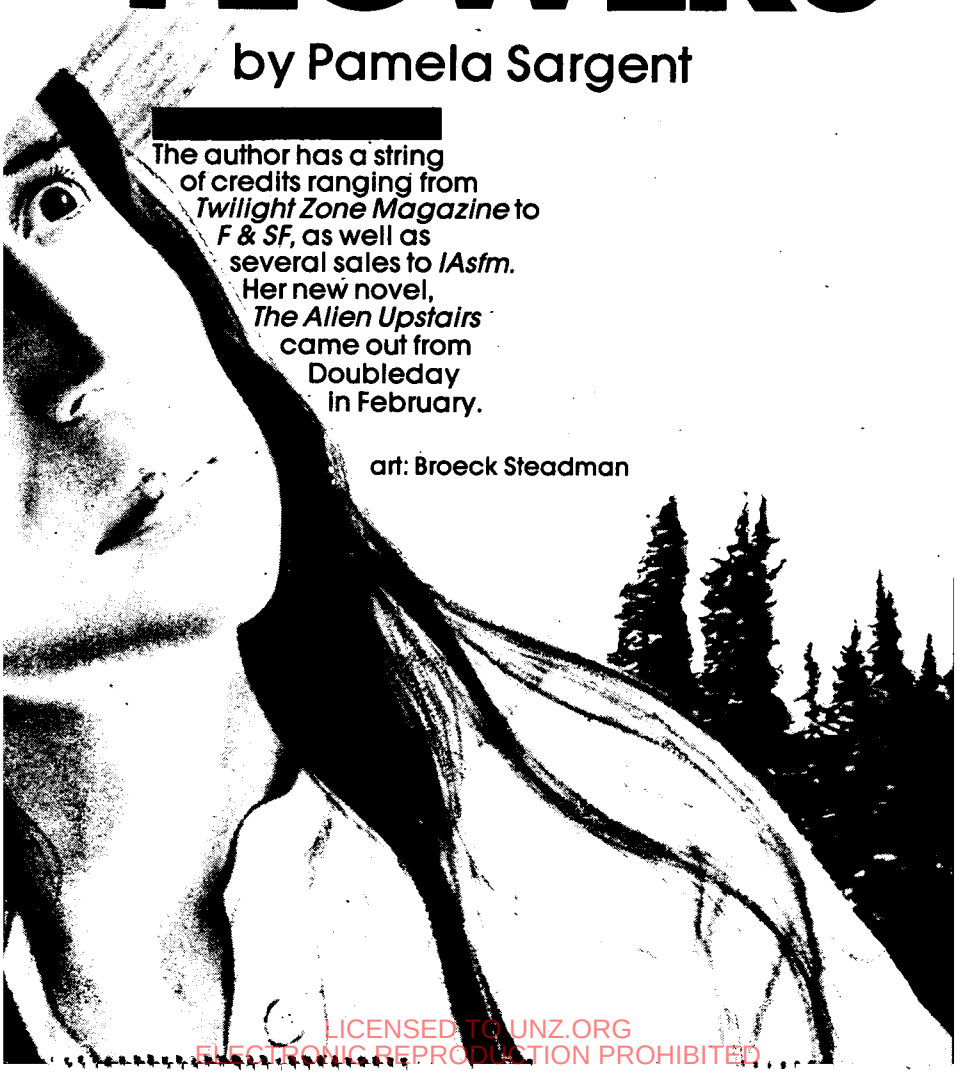
HEAVENLY FLOWERS

by Pamela Sargent

The author has a string of credits ranging from *Twilight Zone Magazine* to *F & SF*, as well as several sales to *IAsfm*. Her new novel, *The Alien Upstairs* came out from Doubleday in February.

art: Broeck Steadman



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The sun was too bright. Maisie tried to ignore the ache in her joints and the gnawing pain in her intestines. She sat in the back seat of an old Ford station wagon, her head resting on Gene's shoulder. Junior, sitting on Maisie's left, squealed as he caught sight of a thick, green bush and a patch of blue wildflowers, their colors bright against the desolate, pockmarked ground.

Lydia was driving, and the car began to lurch, jostling Maisie and making her ache even more. Talia began to bounce on the front seat and whined softly as her father Drew stared out the window, trying to ignore the girl.

"Need anything?" Gene asked Maisie.

"I can hold out."

He patted her shoulder. The car stalled. Lydia gunned the motor, then switched off the ignition.

Drew sighed. "Better get out and stretch," he said.

Everyone got out and stood by the side of the highway while Drew opened the hood and fiddled with the engine. Lydia tied Talia's bonnet firmly on the child's head, then said to Junior, "Put on your hat."

"Aw."

"Put it on right now."

Junior put on his oversized fedora. Maisie adjusted her wide-brimmed hat and rolled down her sleeves. They had allowed themselves plenty of time, but she had hoped that they would arrive early; she did not want to miss any of the festivities. This ceremony was special, the thirtieth anniversary, and perhaps the last time a nationwide ceremony would be held. Radio broadcasts had alerted everyone; people from all over the country would be there. Maisie's family had been traveling for two days and would reach the fairground by the following evening if Drew did not have to spend too much time nursing the Ford. She suspected that this was the last long trip the car would ever make.

"I could use some now," Maisie said to Gene.

He grunted and reached inside his shirt pocket, took out a pouch, and tapped some weed into a cigarette paper while Lydia looked on, frowning her disapproval. Gene passed the lighted joint to Maisie, who toked on it, then handed it back.

The highway, pocked with potholes and partly covered by drifting sand, stretched out toward the horizon in the east and disappeared among brown hills in the west. Maisie squinted; another vehicle was approaching from the east, crawling along the road as it weaved its way around the potholes and broken asphalt. As it came nearer, she saw that it was a red Subaru, and wondered

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how its owner had kept it going; parts for Japanese cars had become hard to find lately.

The Subaru pulled up behind the Ford and a middle-aged man got out; his passenger stayed inside. The man rolled down his sleeves and adjusted his hat. Maisie took a last toke and handed the roach to Gene, who leaned over, stubbed it out, and tucked it into his pocket.

"Hey!" the stranger said as he walked over to them.

"Hey," Gene answered.

"You going to the fairground?"

"You bet," Maisie said, thinking it was a foolish question.

"So am I. Jim Fairbairn." He stuck out his gloved hand and Gene shook it. "That's my wife, Dora. She's not feeling so good at the moment."

"Gene Sakowitz."

"Mrs. Sakowitz?" Jim Fairbairn said as he shook Maisie's hand.

She shook her head. "Maisie Torrance. Gene's my man, but we aren't married. This is our daughter, Lydia Simpson—that's her husband, Drew, by the car. And this is Talia, and that's their boy Junior over there."

Junior was pissing at the side of the road. "Say hello to the man," Lydia shouted. Junior buttoned his trousers, wandered over, and mumbled a greeting while Talia stared. Maisie wiped her face with one sleeve; the sun was hot.

"How's your car holding up?" Jim asked.

"It's doing all right," Maisie said. "How far have you come, Jim?"

"Ohio."

"Long way." Maisie cleared her throat, which was dry from the pot, and took a breath, feeling better; her pain had been dulled. "Been out before?"

"Not since I was a kid. This highway goes all the way to the fairground, doesn't it? I checked an old map before I left."

"Yeah. But I wouldn't follow it if I were you. About twenty miles from here, you run into a hot spot—you have to take the long way around if you don't want to get cooked."

Jim frowned. "Maybe I can follow you."

Gene shrugged. "If you want."

"I'd be obliged."

"Keep your hat on, young man," Lydia shouted at Junior, who was swinging it over his head.

Jim glanced at the boy. "Nice-looking kid. You must be proud of him."

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Lydia nodded. Maisie tapped Gene's pocket. He took out his weed, rolled another joint, and handed it to Jim. "For your wife," Maisie said. "It helps the pain a little."

"Thanks."

Drew had finished with the engine and was filling the tank with alcohol. When he was done, he motioned to them. Lydia picked Talia up, lugging the girl's heavy body back to the car; Jim opened the door for her.

Drew took the wheel. They rode on, the Subaru trailing them. Lydia turned toward Maisie, resting her arm on the seat. "You didn't have to make a point of telling him you and Father aren't married."

Maisie was about to reply, but caught herself. Younger people set more store by such ceremonies, and she couldn't blame them for it; they longed for the signs of order and normality. But only one ceremony mattered to her, the one they were soon to witness, the one that reminded Maisie of how much she had lost and of how lucky she was to be alive.

The plain was covered by tents and pavilions, and Maisie's family had to set up camp on the edge of the grounds after arriving at the fairground. There was one consolation; a big truck carrying tanks of water had parked near them, so they would not have to go far for that commodity.

Maisie sat against the Ford while Drew and Lydia settled the children inside their tent. Gene, after pawing through his collection of items for barter, had taken out a tape cassette to swap for some water. A man on horseback rode by and waved; he was followed by a woman offering to trade flashlights and pencils for dried meat.

Gene returned with two large bottles and two men. The older man was stooped and wizened, but Maisie caught her breath as she stared at the younger one. Under his hat, his handsome face glowed with good health; she had not seen such a beautiful young man in a long time. As the young man sat down, he bowed his head, as though aware of Maisie's reaction.

Gene introduced Maisie, then gestured at the two men. "David Chung. And this is his son, Paul."

Paul brushed back a lock of black hair, smiled at Maisie, then looked down again. David grinned. "We've only been here a few hours, and Paul's had offers already."

Maisie said, "I'm not surprised."

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"I have two grandchildren already," David went on. "One of them takes after Paul."

"We've got a strong grandson." Maisie did not mention poor Talia.

"I know—Gene told me."

"We met over by the water truck," Gene said. "David came all the way from California."

"I don't know if we should have come at all," Paul blurted out. "We dwell on it too much. Maybe it's better just to forget."

Maisie shook her head. "Even if we tried, we couldn't. And we shouldn't. People have to remember. It's important for you young folks to keep up the ceremony after we're gone."

"How?"

Paul had asked a good question, and Maisie did not have an answer. David pulled a pipe out of his pocket and tapped in some weed. "Sinsemilla," he said proudly.

Gene sighed. "I didn't think there was any left."

"We still grow some." David lit the pipe, puffed, and passed it to Maisie, who drew in the smoke deeply. She felt a rush as she handed the pipe to Gene. Paul did not smoke; like all young people, he guarded his health, avoiding such habits.

When they had finished David's marijuana, Gene got out a little of his homegrown, and they passed the pipe again. Lydia glared at them as she came over for one of the water jars; as she caught sight of Paul, she straightened up and stared at him. Maisie giggled as Lydia retreated to the tent.

"Your daughter?" David asked. "The one with the healthy boy?"

Maisie nodded; the pot made her want to laugh again.

"What do you think?" David said to Paul.

"Maybe we can bargain," the young man answered.

"What do you think?" David asked Maisie.

"You'll have to talk to Drew—that's her husband. And Lydia'll want to know Paul's history."

Paul got up and went to the tent. Drew and Lydia came outside and talked to him while the old people finished the pot. Maisie, noticing that the sun was almost down, took off her hat and fanned herself with it as she watched.

At last Drew went to the car, took out a pack, rummaged in it, and removed a vial, handing it to Paul. As Lydia approached, Drew took her hand, kissed her on the cheek, then gave her hand to the other man. That's Drew, Maisie thought, formal as always—never neglecting custom.

Paul led Lydia away. "Hope it works out," David said.

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"Hope so." Maisie, stoned, was feeling optimistic. Her own attempts with other men at past festivals had resulted in two miscarriages, but she had lost two of Gene's children as well. Lydia was stronger.

They sat, talking of old times until it was completely dark. David took out a pocket flashlight while Gene and Maisie showed him some of their treasures—a matchbox bearing the University of Wisconsin seal, a Phillips screwdriver, a Boy Scout handbook, a pair of scissors.

When Lydia returned, she went directly to the tent. David stood up. "Better get some rest. Things start early."

"See you tomorrow," Gene said. He helped Maisie to her feet. "Feeling all right?"

"I'm fine."

"I think Drew gave a lot of the medicine to Paul."

Maisie was suddenly resentful; Drew should have asked her first. But Lydia's chance at another healthy baby was more important, and she could get by without the pills for now.

The clear blue morning sky promised a good day for the ceremonies. Maisie sat on the hood of the Ford, estimating the crowd; there were close to three thousand people on the plain, and she supposed that almost every town had sent several of its citizens.

Two rivers of people were streaming toward the distant silos; for that extra thrill, they would miss much of the ceremony itself. Others were seating themselves near the raised platform of wood in the center of the field, putting up umbrellas and canopies to shade themselves.

Lydia strode toward her from the tent. "Mother? We're going over to Paul's tent with Junior, and then we're going to try to get a good seat. Need anything?"

"I'm fine." Maisie frowned. "Twice with Paul?"

"That was the bargain. And Drew thinks Junior ought to meet him."

"He would. He must have given Paul a lot of pills for two times."

"I know. I'm sorry. But you understand." Lydia lowered the veil on her floppy blue hat, hiding her face.

"Yes, I understand."

"We'll see you afterwards. Talia's in the tent—I gave her something, so she should sleep through everything, but you'd better look in on her once in a while."

"Sure."

Lydia walked off with Drew and Junior. Five young people

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passed Maisie on their way toward the platform; their faces were attractive, but she could not know what their loose, flowing garments hid. Two of the boys wore Panama hats, another had a sombrero, and the two girls were wearing large white bonnets. Maisie adjusted her hat, lowering the brim. She had put it on at dawn, out of habit, though she could not benefit from its protection now. Two veiled women passed, their long skirts swaying around their legs.

Jim Fairbairn got out of his car and came over to her. "Going to look for a seat?"

"We're staying here." She paused. "We've got binoculars."

Jim whistled. "Lucky you." He glanced toward the platform. Several old soldiers were on the stand, fiddling with the sound system; they would soon be on their way to the silos. "As I recall," Jim went on, "they don't get started until late afternoon."

"That's right. But if you want a good seat, you'd better go now."

"I'm staying here. Dora's pretty sick. I don't want to leave her alone." He lowered his voice. "She's the one who really wanted to come. I didn't think she'd make it this far. She just wanted to be here, even if she doesn't see anything."

"I can understand that."

Jim leaned against the car. "We were just little kids when it happened, so we don't really know what it was like before. It must be harder for you."

Maisie did not reply at first, wishing Jim had not spoken of that. "We're alive," she said. "We're thankful for that." She could say it now; she could not have said it thirty years ago, when she had longed for death and had cursed herself for surviving.

"Well, I'd better get back to Dora."

As Jim got back into his car, Gene returned with David Chung. "Dave's going to sit with us. Think we'll see well enough from here?"

Maisie lifted her binoculars and focused on the platform. "Sure."

"The Chinese envoy's here," David said. "And a Russian from the Council. They're really doing things up this year."

Maisie nodded. "I heard on the radio that we sent people to their ceremonies, too."

"I wonder what we'll do next year," Gene murmured.

Maisie thought, I won't be doing much of anything. She climbed down from the car. "I'm going to check on Talia, and then rest for a while." She hobbled away from the men, pressing her lips together, trying to ignore the pain.

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The sky was still unclouded that afternoon as Maisie waited for the ceremony to begin. The crowd, noisy throughout the day, was settling down. People had positioned themselves near the platform on chairs and blankets and under protective umbrellas and veils while vendors circulated among them, trying to make a few last trades for food and drink before the ceremony started.

She glanced at Jim's car; he and Dora were still inside. Taking the binoculars from David, she gazed at the platform. Various dignitaries were already seated under the canopy; one old soldier, dressed in an officer's uniform, got up, crossed the platform, and knelt before a group of old people sitting near the edge. They gazed sightlessly past him. The old people, representing all of those who had been blinded thirty years before by glancing at the approaching destruction, had a special place of honor.

The officer beat his chest and wailed as the crowd grew silent. Then the president rose and approached the microphone.

"Testing," he said, and the ominous word rang out over the plain. "Testing." He adjusted his hat, a Stetson bearing the Stars and Stripes, then struck his chest with one fist. "I accuse myself." He was a lean young man with the scars of skin cancer surgery on his face, and could not have been more than a child thirty years ago, but the words were part of the ceremony. "I accuse myself of murder. I am guilty of genocide. Billions lie in graves because of me."

The Russian was at his side; he wore a fedora with an embroidered hammer and sickle. "I accuse myself," the Russian said as the president yielded the microphone. "I am a murderer, guilty of the worst crime in human history." The Chinese envoy, a small woman wearing a cap with a red star, then said the same words in a high-pitched singsong.

Maisie drew up her knees, resting her elbows on them as she gazed through her binoculars. Gene and David took turns looking through the other pair. The three dignitaries on the platform lifted their eyes to the sky.

"We brought death on the world, and our guilt will never be washed away," the president cried. "Speak the names."

The crowd below uttered an indistinct barrage of names. Maisie put down her binoculars and whispered as many as she could remember; her father, her mother, her two brothers, her best friends. She blocked her memories of that day, thinking only of the names. Gene rocked as he spoke; David covered his eyes. Within an hour, a billion had died; within a month, another bil-

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lion; within a year, most of the world. Maisie had found that out only later.

As the murmuring faded, the president spoke again. "Let the ceremony begin."

Maisie lifted her binoculars. The president knelt, and others on the stand approached, carrying long sticks, tapping them on the president's shoulder as they passed. This part of the ceremony depicted the death of the president who had launched the missiles, who had been beaten to death by an angry, dying mob when he had emerged from his shelter. Maisie muttered the name of that man, making it a curse. The Russian and the Chinese were also tapped with the sticks, though rumor had it that the Russian leader had been assassinated in his shelter by his successor, while the Chinese leader had committed suicide.

A woman stepped forward, stood near the president, and wailed as she clutched her belly, symbolizing the fear of mothers for their children and the birth of the maimed and deformed. Another woman was strewing dirt on the platform, a reminder of the poisoned earth.

Maisie lowered her arms. The pain was returning. She clenched her teeth, determined to get through the rest of the ceremony somehow. A few people on the edges of the crowd seemed restless. A couple of small children, obviously bored, were poking at each other; a group of young people whispered among themselves. The ceremony meant little to them. Maisie shook her head. They had to be made to remember.

"Never again," the president shouted, and the crowd took up the cry: "Never again." The young people Maisie was watching looked up; she saw their lips move. "Never again." At least they were saying the words.

"We have disarmed," the president went on. "Never again will so many die. Never again will men fight other men. Never again will the world know mass weapons of destruction. At last we have what so many sought—universal peace, a world council, and good will toward all our fellows."

"A little late," David muttered.

Maisie touched his arm. "At least you have Paul."

"I hope he and your daughter have a good, strong child."

"I hope so, too."

"I think it's a mistake—not having any more national ceremonies after this one."

"Maybe. But there'd be nothing to hold them with. That's good, though. We'll be rid of them all after tonight."

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"But the custom's important," David said.

"This is my last ceremony. I'll never see another one anyway."

"I don't think I will, either."

The sun was setting. The people on the platform were now lifting tattered flags, holding them up before the spectators, then slapping them down on the planks, stamping on them with their feet. Stars and stripes fell next to a red flag bearing the hammer and sickle, followed by a red star, the Union Jack, a maple leaf, the Tricolor, the Sword and Crescent, the Star of David, and various other banners. Some of the flags were so ragged that it was impossible to tell which countries they had once represented.

A woman marched forward with the world flag, a phoenix rising from ashes against a black background, and the audience sighed, then was still. Maisie trembled at the silence, which reminded her of the quiet that had pressed in around her when she had emerged to find the world in ruins.

As the sun disappeared behind the distant mountains, she heard the rumble, and clutched at David's hand. Gene let out his breath. The rumble grew louder, thundering over the plain; the ground trembled. Maisie tensed, thinking for a moment that she would be thrown from the earth. She covered her ears, but her body still felt the thunder.

As the missiles were launched from the east, the car vibrated with the roar. Maisie lifted her head, following the trails as the missiles arced toward the purple sky. She gazed at the flickering flames and the threads of smoke until she heard the last clap of thunder, and could see the weapons no more.

She waited. A bloom of light, far above the atmosphere, dying in the darkness. She closed her eyes and turned her head away, even though she knew there was no danger. Far away, physics was different, like the silence under the sea or the warmth of the sun.

"We live," the president shouted.

"We live! We live!" the crowd answered.

The last weapons were gone; the world was disarmed.

"We live," Maisie whispered.

The people near the stand were dancing, shouting out the words. The celebration would last into the night; she supposed that many bargains would be made before morning.

The pain clawed at her then; she toppled forward, almost sliding off the car. David caught her while Gene hurried around to her side. "Maisie?"

"Gene," she said, slumping into his arms.

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She awoke in the tent, and saw light through the flap; it was morning. Gene was at her side. He put a pill in her mouth and handed her a cup of water; she swallowed it.

"We have plenty of medicine now," he said. "I gave the binoculars to David, and he gave back the pills Drew gave to Paul. Paul doesn't mind, and we need the medicine more than an extra set of binoculars."

"Thanks." She tried to sit up, and could not. "I won't make it home."

"Yes, you will."

She shook her head. He lifted her up and carried her outside, setting her down on a pillow against the Ford, then put her hat on her head. Two cars, a truck, and a horse-drawn buckboard rattled by; people were heading home.

Jim Fairbairn's car was gone, a mound of earth in its place. Maisie pulled at Gene's sleeve.

"Dora died last night," he said. "I helped Jim dig the grave. I guess we're all experts at that."

Maisie sighed, wondering how long she and Dora might have lived without the war. Drew wandered over and peered at her, looking concerned. "You all right, Maisie?"

"I'm fine."

"Did Gene tell you? The president said that, next year, every town should hold its own ceremony—he announced it at dawn. He'll say something over the radio, and every town will have a festival, so this isn't the last one after all. Of course, they'll be smaller, and we'll have to use fireworks instead of missiles."

"We won't forget," Gene said. "It'll be like the Fourth of July used to be."

"No," Maisie said. "Not like the Fourth."

Drew went to help Lydia take down the tent. Maisie gazed at them, Drew with his slightly humped back and skin cancer scars, Lydia with her oversized head. They didn't look too bad—not as bad as some. Talia, lying next to Maisie, kicked her feet, twisting the shapeless garment that hid her armless body, then hummed tunelessly while Maisie stroked her granddaughter's head, wondering if the child would ever be able to speak.

Junior sat near the tent, pouting. Gene motioned to him. "You going to behave?" Junior did not answer. "He got into a fight with another boy this morning," Gene went on. "Called him a mutie. I had to break it up." He waved at the boy again. "Get over here, young man, before that tent falls on top of you."

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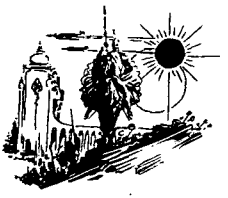
Junior wandered over to them, clutching a toy made of wood. One end of the toy came to a point; two wings had been carved on its sides. The boy lifted it, swooped toward Maisie, then stabbed the toy into the ground at her feet.

"Boom," Junior shouted as he strewed dirt around with his hands. "Kaboom. Boom. Bang." ●



MARTIN GARDNER (from page 57)

SECOND SOLUTION TO FIBONACCI BAMBOO

We know that the rectangle's area is both the product of a and b, and the sum of a and b. A little algebra shows that a must equal b divided by $b - 1$. It is easy to see that the only solution in positive integers is $a = 2$, $b = 2$, therefore the rectangle is a 2-by-2 square with an area of 4.

Now see how long it takes you to answer an even simpler question. If the three sides of a triangle, a,b,c, are three consecutive integers in a generalized Fibonacci sequence, what expression gives the triangle's area? See page 129 for the answer.

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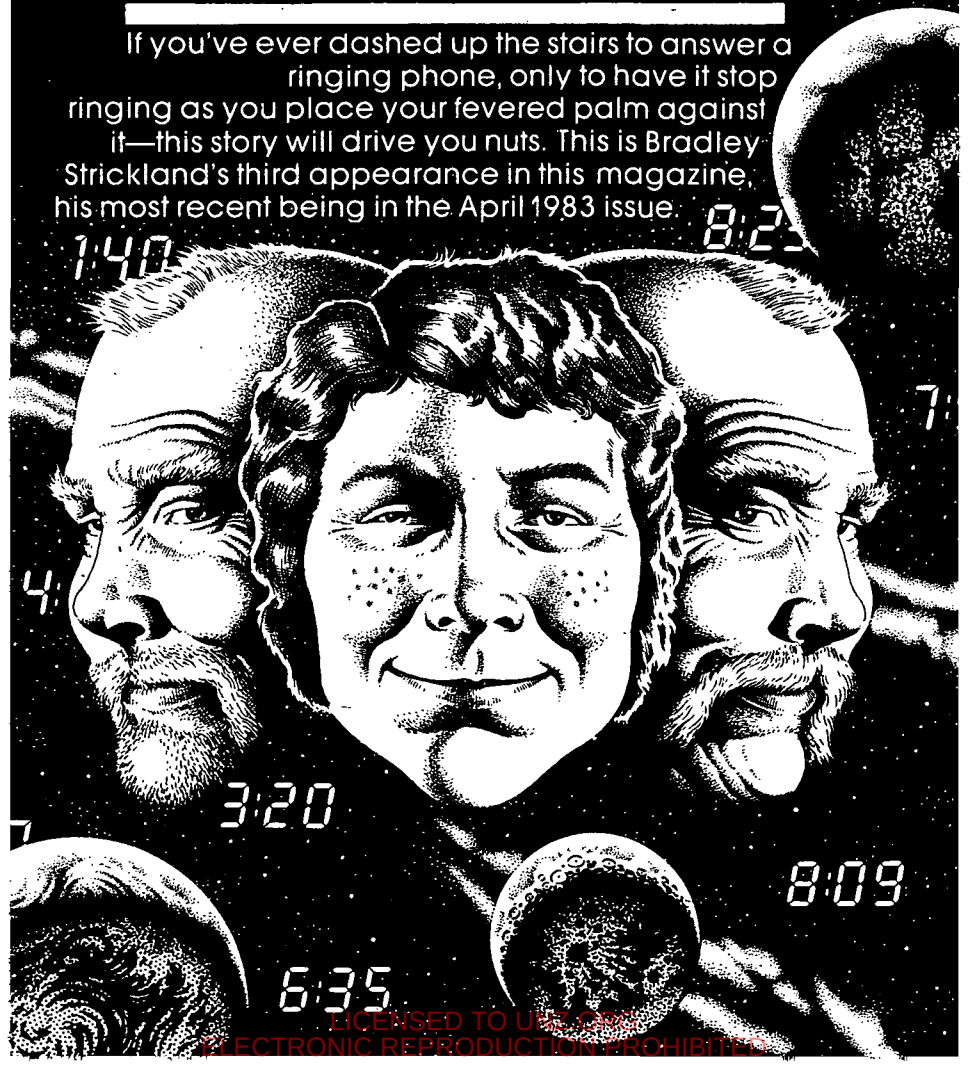
STOLEN MOMENTS

by Bradley Strickland

art: Robert Walters

If you've ever dashed up the stairs to answer a ringing phone, only to have it stop ringing as you place your fevered palm against it—this story will drive you nuts. This is Bradley Strickland's third appearance in this magazine, his most recent being in the April 1983 issue.



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On a January morning with a sky so cold and blue that, if you thumped it, it would shatter like skim ice on a farm pond, I kissed Becky good-bye, climbed into my car, and sat a minute to let the engine warm up. Becky had driven the car last, the previous evening when she had gone out for some groceries, and she had tuned the radio to one of her country-western stations. A woman's voice, nasal and whining, dragged out a little snatch of song:

You stole my heart—ain't that a crime?
Now I'm a thief, too, stealin' your time.
Sto-len mo-o-ments of your life,
Sto-len hu-u-sband, cryin' wife;
Sto-len mo-o-ments lovin' a man,
Cryin', tryin' . . . to understand.

With a barely suppressed shudder, I switched the radio off, backed out of my driveway through a billowing fog of my car's exhaust, and, shaking my head at my otherwise urbane wife's taste in popular music, headed down the lane toward the highway, the city, and my office.

But half a mile from the four-lane I saw an old car, a '55 Chevy, off on the side of the highway. Beside it a young man in a brightly colored short-sleeved sports shirt waved his arms at me. No other cars were in sight, so I pulled onto the shoulder just ahead of the Chevy. Call me Sir Galahad in an Olds station wagon.

Despite my hat and topcoat I winced from the knifelike chill when I opened the door. The man—hardly more than a freckled and grinning boy, with a pumpkin-orange shock of hair—ducked his head repeatedly in delighted acknowledgement of my presence. "I am so gratified you halted your forward progress, Mister," he called cheerily.

I walked toward him, crunching over columns of frost. "Aren't you a little cold?" I asked, staring at his shirt, a number out of a beach boy's nightmare, primarily aquamarine but spotted with tiny pink flamingos and Da-glo green frogs.

"I am homoiothermous. But I surmise my vehicle is not. Your name, sir?"

"Lund," I said. "Al Lund." I extended my hand. He extended his, too, from a distance of three feet away.

"I am a stranger, alas, in these parts." He dropped his hand, and, feeling rather foolish, I dropped mine. He grinned as though delighted and continued: "Am I correct in the assumption that you possess a current-transferring device that might assist my automobile to activate its engine?"

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I puffed out my cheeks. My breath steamed visibly in the cold air. "College boy, right?"

His lips formed the words in mimicry of mine. Then the pumpkin-colored hair ducked in enthusiastic agreement. "Correct!"

"Exchange student, I hope," I muttered. More loudly, I said, "If you're asking do I have booster cables, the answer is yes. Get the hood open, and I'll turn the wagon around."

Traffic was nonexistent—unusual for this time of the day, I thought—and I made a careful three-point turnaround to nose the hood of my car up to that of the boy's. He stood in the same place, with the hood still closed. When I got out again, a fresh little northeastern breeze wrung tears from me and threatened to freeze my eyelids shut. The redhead lounged with his hands in his pockets, apparently enjoying the sunshine.

"Your hood latch broken, too?" I asked.

The freckles on the boy's cheeks rode up toward his eyes in an ingratiating smile. "I am unfortunately not cognizant of the apparatus for freeing the fastening mechanism."

Rolling my eyes heavenward, I unlatched the hood for him. The car was a deep shiny black. It looked new. It *smelled* new. And the sparkling-clean engine could have been manufactured that morning. "You keep your car in good condition," I observed.

"Oh, yes indeedy youbetcha I do."

"Uh—yes." I connected the cables, put the redhead behind the wheel, and instructed him in how to start the engine. By now I was actively speculating about the chemical substances he used for recreation.

The Chevy caught immediately. I got out, disconnected the cables, slammed both hoods shut, and walked to the driver's window of the boy's car. He had rolled it down and was resting one bare elbow on the frigid metal. "Take care," I told him. "Go home, get some rest. Drive very cautiously."

He nodded like a Jack-in-the-box. "Most certainly I shall, you kind person. If I could trouble you so much, would you have the great humanity to inform me of the time?"

I checked my watch. "Eight thirty-seven."

"Ah. The date?"

"January twelfth."

"Good, excellent. And the year?"

I squinted down at him. "Are you by any chance just getting home from a Christmas party? No, forget it." I told him the year and turned back toward my car. When I drove away he was still sitting behind the wheel of his new black '55 Chevy its engine

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humming softly, its little plume of exhaust silvered by the morning sun and waving on the icy breeze.

The encounter made me late. Ginny Starrett, my efficient secretary, scowled as I pushed through the door and shucked off my coat. "You've missed two telephone calls," she accused.

"Car trouble. Who called?"

"The first gentleman did not give me his name. The second was Mr. Sedler of the junior college."

"Sedler, right. Did you get the information on organizational liability to him last week?"

Such questions offend her roughly as much as asking another person whether he's bathed in the past year would offend him. "Of course. He has made a tentative decision and wants your opinion on some legal points. I have made a list. I would suggest you look over it and telephone Mr. Sedler as soon as possible."

Properly chastened, I did just that. It took all of an hour. Then I poked around to see what my partner and assistants were up to. It did not amount to very much: the first few days of January are a slack time for practitioners of our type of law. Wells was working on a tax problem for a local industry, and the clerks were busy with title searches and other odds and ends. No snags worth worrying about appeared, and by eleven I was back in my office catching up on correspondence. Just before noon Gin reminded me of a luncheon appointment with Judge Hatcher, at the Sunflower Restaurant.

I hurried to keep it. Hatcher, now retired, had been my inspiration back when I was a struggling law student. He had since stepped down from the bench, but he was still prominent, still active—the governor had recently appointed him head of a study committee on state drunken-driving laws—and he was still a man I loved to talk to.

Just as we finished an enjoyable meal, Hatcher abruptly asked, "By the way, Al, did that fellow call you?"

"What fellow?"

The old judge raised his white eyebrows. "Damned if I know. Some man called me last night, asked me to recommend a good local attorney. He made it sound intriguing, to say the least. I gave him your name, but he declined to give me his. I expected he'd call you first thing this morning."

"Gin said someone called before I got in. That may have been him."

"Dear boy, get back to your office, then." He chuckled, a rich,

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knowing sound. "One thing I can always tell about a voice over the phone: whether there's money behind it. This one sounded as though it were backed by a well-filled bank vault."

"Then, if you'll excuse me, I *will* get back to the office."

He waved me away. The Sunflower Room, perched atop the LeJeune Plaza Hotel, is the loftiest restaurant in town, and sometimes getting down to street level from there is a problem in logistics. This time, however, an express elevator winked its light at me, and I sprinted through the closing doors just in time.

An elevator operator sat atop a stool. He and I were the only occupants. I looked at his resplendent sky-blue uniform, draped with more gold braid than a convention of admirals, and he nodded comfortably at me. "What floor, please, sir, do you most desire to be deposited upon?" he asked.

I knew the voice. I scrutinized the man closely. He was about fifty, with a little pot belly and a big bulbous nose. The peaked uniform cap shaded his eyes. A walrus moustache, once red but now touched heavily with gray—the frost is on the pumpkin, I thought wildly—drooped to hide his mouth. His cheeks showed faded traces of freckles.

"How long has the hotel employed elevator operators?" I asked him.

"I commenced the execution of my duties today only, sir. What floor pleases you?"

"Third Street exit," I muttered. He nodded and touched a button. The elevator dropped like a stitch in my wife's knitting, then jittered to a stop.

I found myself clutching the wall railing hard enough to leave finger impressions in the metal. "What happened?"

The elevator operator blinked mild eyes at me. "A malfunction has occurred in the lowering device, I fear. We appear securely to be lodged upon the twenty-and-second floor. As this is an elevator of express to the bottom ten floors, we appear to lack means of egress."

I unclenched my fingers, one at a time. "Are you by any chance putting your son through college?"

The walrus moustache might have lifted a bit at the corners. "I have at this time produced no offspring, sir." He took off his cap and rubbed a palm across a shiny bald pate. "I should not in your place become alarmed unduly, sir. These malfunctions often are straightened out by automatically functioning devices within a matter of only eleven minutes and twenty-one seconds at best. Are you rushed, sir?"

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"I suppose not."

"Good and excellent." The man studied the polished toes of his black jackboots for a few seconds, then brightened and looked at me. "And how do you believe the sporting organization of your preference will comport itself in the competitive season, sir?"

"Oh, the Steelers are going to win the America's Cup," I assured him.

"I should not be at all perturbed, sir," he beamed. "By the local deities, is it not grand to be exchanging sporting platitudes like this?"

Though the complete list of subjects we discussed in the eleven minutes and twenty-one seconds we were stranded has escaped me, I'm sure we must have touched on cabbages, kings, and sealing-wax. Then the little automatically-functioning devices functioned automatically, and we descended safely to my floor. As the elevator slowed to a normal stop, I blurted, "Do you want to know the time?"

"If it is convenient for you to oblige."

I looked at my watch. "It is precisely one-thirteen P.M.," I informed him. I added the month, date, and year. He nodded gravely, and I fled through the elevator doors as soon as they hissed open.

Gin had replaced her third-degree scowl with a second-degree one. "You said you would be back no later than one-thirty."

"I was held up. Anything?"

"The same gentleman who telephoned early this morning called again. He sounded as though he has an urgent problem. I asked for his name, but he refused to give it to me."

"Well, I'll be in for the rest of the afternoon, if he calls back."

"I am *very* pleased to hear it." And I thought the north wind had been cold.

The afternoon wore on, bringing no extraordinary phone calls, no surprises, no excitement—which was perhaps just as well. When Gin and I packed it in shortly after five, I went outside to find that clouds had slipped in to provide a wrinkled gray canopy over the city. The clouds looked as if they might hold snow, and on the four-lane I switched on the radio to catch a weather report, forgetting it was tuned to Becky's station. The same female voice that had begun my day nosed its way through another verse of the same song, as if the record were endless:

When we're apart, I know it's wrong
To steal those moments, but my need's strong—

I twisted the dial, finally found a local station whose cheerful

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DJ told me to think snow, snow, snow, and with a snarl I shut off the noise.

In the early dusk I turned off the four-lane. A minute later I glanced over at the shoulder where the red-haired young man had been that morning. He had evidently maneuvered away safely. At least he was gone. Stewing in a broth of bad humor, I wished him good riddance—prematurely, as it turned out.

I caught the little country lane that led to my house and followed it through a tall stand of pines. Then, less than a quarter of a mile from my front door, where the lane was narrowest, I had to stop.

A man and his mule blocked the road in front of me.

The man, a bald, spry old fellow dressed more or less like a desert rat, waved happily at me. The mule sat squarely in my path, ignoring me, my car, and the old man. I got out into the cold.

"My firmest apologies, fellow friend," the old man said, stroking a magnificent long gray beard in which touches of red yet lingered. "Oh, bother, my animal has decided to take his rest here. Be of sound wind! He will soon feel refreshed and clear a pathway for you."

I closed my eyes, but when I opened them again the old fellow was still there, solid in the glare of my car's lights. "Who *are* you?" I asked.

He spread his hands. "I seek mineral enrichment from the indigenous desert ores—"

I pointed down the lane. "Just around the curve is a little suburban development of a dozen houses. One of them is mine." I pointed west. "Two thousand miles that way is the nearest desert. So—what the hell are you doing here?"

The man looked at his mule, then down at his own clothing. He sighed. "I have made a minor mistake in location and period?"

"I would assume so."

He shook his head. "Don't apologize! I predicate it makes no matter. Flux changes can be difficult at most. I plead you forgive the inconveniencing of you. It ends never to be repeated briefly."

"What is going on?" The mule seemed to notice the desperation in my voice, and he, at least, gave me a glance of sympathy.

The old man considered. "Not a thing will be wasted by dissemination of the limited knowledge you are capable of absorbing. This case is my biggest one, putting the hat of a monarch on my career. You see, I am not as I seem to you this moment."

"I should hope not."

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"Don't mention it. I am a Time Guard. It falls our task to correct untoward trends in history, eliminating unhappy catastrophes. Normally we perform this action secretively, and the residents of any flux locale remain ignorant of us. Sometimes, however, certain specialists among us, in disguise, language, and customs, must slip unobtrusively in. Behold! I am such an one. In your case, Mr. Lund, I have prevented a potentially hazardous communication. Mr. Lund, rest yourself in knowing we have averted the explosion of one populated world in the galactic neighborhood and the subjugation of billions of humanoids under an iron heel of a tyrannical despotic man who is not nice."

"I'm—flattered."

"No, it is for me to be flattered. You have to me proved a monstrous help. I feel sorrow for the interesting opportunities your life now can never offer you, but assuredly the happiness of fellow-creatures overtips the bathroom scales, not so?"

My head ached. "Sure." My laugh blew away in little hysterical puffs of condensation. "Let me understand you. You're from the future, right?"

"Future is inexact terminology. The temporal flux juncture affords my own node a location—"

"Stop. I don't know what on earth you're talking about."

"I am merely attempting a translation of terminological—" he broke off, his eyes glittering at me. "Did your lips form the word 'earth'?" Before I could reply, he whipped something from his jeans pocket. It could have been a credit-card sized calculator, except it talked to him in a sizzling, hissing language like nothing I'd ever heard. The old man seemed to turn pale, though that may have been a trick of the twilight. He stamped his left foot. "This represents not the planetary surface of the third orbital body of the Alpha Centauri System?"

"No. This is Earth, of the Solar System."

"Alas! That means a confounding of my files has existed for the term of my operation! You are not case ferk-cart-meeble, but toom-platz-grom," he mumbled. "My imperative is that you must be caused to receive a most urgent message from—go! Insert your body in your vehicle and go! We have but one chance left, or all is—hurry! Discorporate, beast."

The mule dissolved into little purple and green fireflies which guttered out one by one. "Oh my gracious fiddlesticks," groaned the man, clapping the heels of his hands together in an agony of insistence. "Do hurry!"

I jumped into the Olds. When I drove through the spot where

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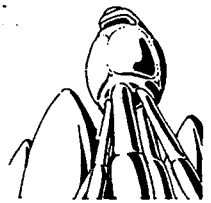
the mule had been, I didn't dare look into the rear-view mirror. Half a minute later I screeched into my own driveway.

Becky met me at the door. "Oh, honey, you just missed a phone call—"

I put my finger against her lips. "Don't. Please don't tell me about it."

She brushed my hand away and frowned at me. "Al? Are you all right? You look so funny. Darling—what happened today?"

I sighed. "Darling—I wish to hell I knew." ●



MARTIN GARDNER (from page 120)

THIRD SOLUTION TO FIBONACCI BAMBOO

The area of the Fibonacci triangle is zero. Any triangle with one side equal to the sum of the other two sides is a triangle that has degenerated into a straight line segment.

A little more thinking and you will see that no triangle of positive area can have sides that are distinct integers in any Fibonacci sequence even if they are not consecutive.

If you want to know more about Fibonacci sequences and how they are related to biological growth, games, and other curious matters, see the chapter on them in my 1979 book, *Mathematical Circus*. There is a bibliography of selected references for further reading.

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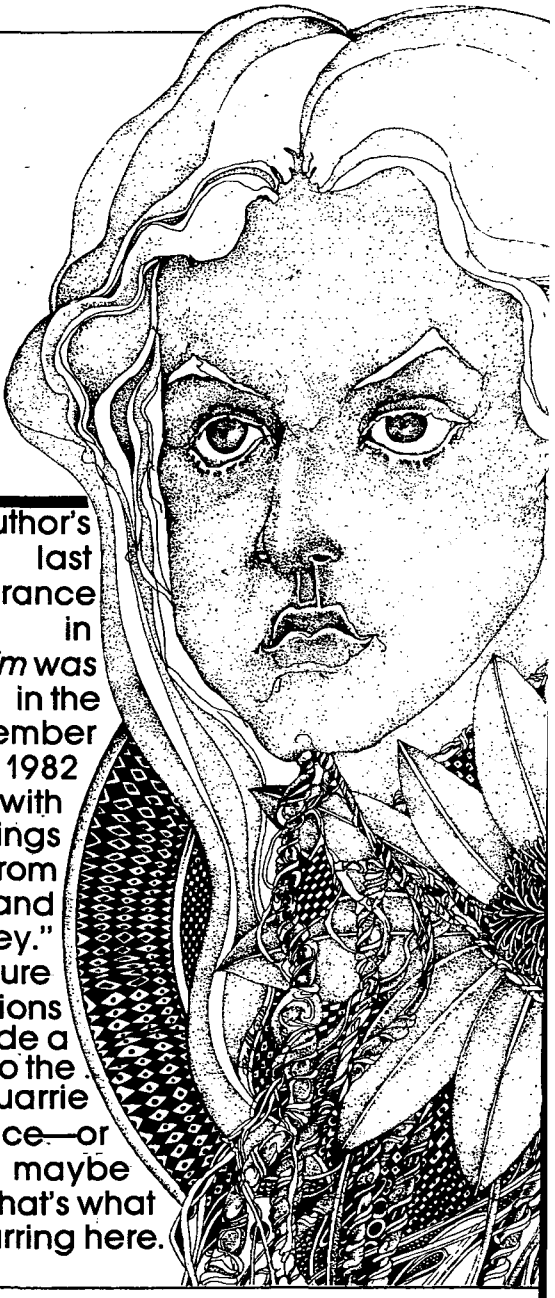
VISITORS

by P. J. MacQuarrie

art: Jim Spanfeller



The author's last appearance in *IAsfm* was in the September 1982 issue with "Greetings from Botz and Spinney." Future ambitions include a visit to the MacQuarrie homeplace—or maybe that's what is occurring here.

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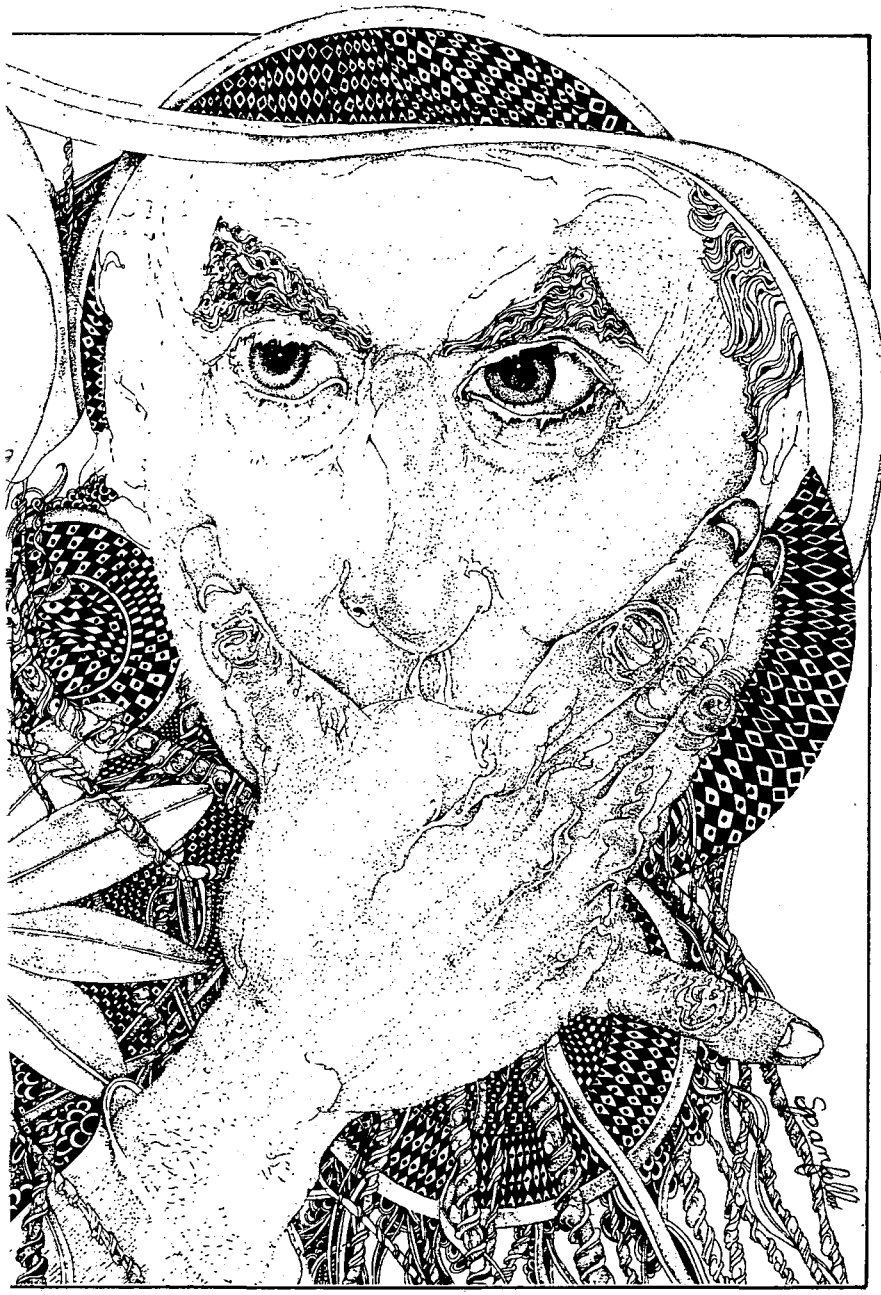

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"Why are those people standing in our yard?"

The elderly couple, holding hands, stood dreamily by the lilac bush, staring up at Warren Denarett's bedroom window. Warren stared down at them, wondering uneasily if they saw him or only a reflection of trees and sky.

Gina squeezed in front of him and looked the couple over. "No problem," she said, already moving away, picking up Warren's pajamas from the floor and adding them to an armful of laundry. "They were here yesterday, too. They lived in this house sixty years ago when they were newlyweds, and they came back to see it."

"How interesting," mused Warren, but Gina was already on her way down the stairs. Down in the front yard, the bald-headed man kissed the white-haired woman on the cheek, whispered in her ear, and they both looked up at the window again, smiling. Warren drew back. Newlyweds so long ago, here. Warren hurried from the room, almost embarrassed.

"Do they plan to drop by every day, may I ask?" he called as he ran down the stairs.

"How would I know?" came her voice, far-off in the basement. Then, "They're from St. Louis, so they must be visiting."

Since the couple did not appear again, Warren soon lost his habit of pausing and pulling the curtains aside, and he even chuckled now as he passed that window.

"I thought it was very sweet," Gina would counter seriously.

They had owned the hundred-year-old house for seven years. It had cost them enough and was still costing them, but Warren felt it was worth it. Vintage architecture was a rarity in this day. Sleeker dwellings had sprouted like crops of mushrooms, replacing all the house's contemporaries in this neighborhood. The house was an antique, an investment, gaining value every year, while structures like it across the land were being demolished for lack of upkeep.

In seven years, its shingled exterior had received a fresh coat of gray paint and the trim a coat of white. In seven years, the roof had been reshingled and the whole house rewired. The wooden floors upstairs had been refinished and, in some spots, replaced. Some modern conveniences had been added over the years, but most of the historical appointments had been preserved; the house would always be worth more that way. When the right time came, Warren could sell it as a museum piece. Money in my pocket, he liked to say each time he spent a bit to keep the place

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in shape. There was brand new screenwire now on Warren's warm-weather lair, the porch at the back of the house.

It was here one evening, as he sat reading, that he heard voices.

"That's the tree, right there, the one I fell out of and broke my leg. Crickety! It's grown into a giant!"

Warren rose and tried to see the owner of the voice, pressing his cheek against the screen. "I landed right here." The person, whoever it was, was around the house, in front of it, out of view. When Warren emerged from the front door, touching fingertips to the screenwire pattern embossed on his face, he found a man, a woman, and a small boy standing under the red maple.

"Now don't *you* ever try that," the woman was saying to the boy.

"May I help you?" asked Warren coolly.

He recoiled from the hand that was thrust out but felt obligated to shake it. The man was not in a hurry to let go.

"I'm Oz Watkins. This is my wife Donna and our son Desmond. I used to live here, yes, grew up in this house." The youngish man paused, grinning, as if expecting some exclamation of wonder from Warren. His pinkish face was open: no secrets here. He was ready to divulge more.

"You didn't really grow up here, Oz," said his wife. In short and shiny clothes, she seemed dressed for a resort, not his front yard, Warren thought.

"Three years here, important years. We just came back to show Des. He's the age I was when we moved here from Minneapolis."

Warren had extracted his hand. "Well."

The pinkish boy stared solemnly up at him, probably wondering how the checkered patch had come to be above and to the left of the moustache on Warren's smooth and egg-shaped face.

"It's changed, and yet it hasn't. Some things are just the same around here, and some things are gone, just gone! Say, I don't suppose—would it be asking too much if we were just to take a look inside? I was telling Des about my room—"

"My wife would faint," Warren said. "We're redecorating, and the stairs are entirely blocked. Maybe some other time."

"Well, sure. We'll just zip on over to the hospital. I want Des to see how the ambulance went when I broke my leg."

They moved toward their vehicle, the boy still staring back at Warren. "My father built the barbecue in back," the man called, "and the stone retaining wall here by the drive. Quite a guy for building things."

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Warren went in to dinner in his dining room in his hundred-year-old house that was not being redecorated.

"Absurd," he said to Gina. "Dragging that child all over my lawn, then asking if they could roam through my house."

Gina stopped eating and gazed reflectively past Warren and into the flowered wallpaper pattern behind him. "If I had children, I'd want them to know about my past. Kids see their moms and dads just as they are, as grown-ups with no childhood behind them. You have to let them know you were a child too, and telling them probably isn't enough. You have to show them."

"Rubbish. That child was bored out of his mind. The point is, it's trespassing; it's rude. They didn't even ask. They just trouped through the yard. People have completely lost their manners."

"They asked. I told them they could," said Gina. He looked up sharply and saw not her eyes but the twist of brown hair at the nape of her neck as she disappeared into the kitchen to fetch dessert.

It was several days before Warren felt comfortable on his screened porch again, when he finally stopped expecting the nasal voice of Oz Watkins to drift around the corner. But gradually the setting worked its wonders on him. When he glanced up from his after-work reading, everything was as it should be. Cameo roses by the garage, rose-of-Sharon and lilac at his back, lily-of-the-valley under the mock orange, which was now fully eight feet high. Some blooming now, some not. All botanically correct for the age of the house. It was fortunate that the tall oaks, scattered down the sweep of back lawn, had survived their many years on this spot. At the back, Warren had planted a screen of poplars between his lot and Taco-Two. It had been a lot of work, but it had been worth it; every penny and more would come out of it someday.

As it should be, everything was in place, no wandering, moon-struck people. Warren savored the return of porch serenity and porch ritual, the sitting down in the comfortable metal and fabric chair that molded to his backside, the careful placing of his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose. The opening of the book or magazine, anticipated through the day, was like the opening music of a religious service. Sometimes he almost heard music when he read. He had, by his own count, read more than three hundred books on this very porch. Optimum conditions for the reading man.

He read the best from spring through fall. Winter reading in his study above the porch was all right, but it often put him to

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sleep. But whatever the season, life was well-ordered. Days, he and Gina went to work. Evenings, he read.

The second chair on the porch looked new; he could not remember Gina's ever sitting there. As he read, he heard a door close softly in the house. He was not conscious of what she was doing, but then he seldom found it necessary to wonder. Perhaps she was paying bills, writing letters, watching the tel in the kitchen. Gina used the remote ear clip; Warren was not a fan of tel and found the audio portion, even rooms away, distracting.

Saturday morning there were people in the yard again. By eleven it was fairly crowded. People of all ages, many in family groups, strolled across the verdant lawn, poked under the rose bushes, disappeared around the back of the garage. Warren contacted the munipatrol.

"They say they can't do anything," he reported to Gina in disbelief. "They say it's this way all over town. There are even people across the street at the Aldridges'. I'm going over to talk to Frank."

"He's not home. They've gone to Kokomo to visit Carolyn's girlhood home."

There, as they stood in the hundred-year-old kitchen, Gina switched on the tel to play back a program segment she had recorded the evening before while Warren was reading.

"I don't believe it," breathed Warren as he watched. "I don't believe it," he almost shouted when she switched it off. "Do you mean to tell me all those people are going to get their lives straightened out by ruining my lawn?"

"It started with some new therapy in the East," Gina said quietly. "That was at the beginning of the program, before I decided to record. Then someone wrote a book about it, and now everyone's into it, all over the country. Visiting the places where they used to live."

"They're vacationing in my yard!"

"It helps them. They sort out everything that happened to them. If they were happy here, they enjoy those secure feelings again. If life was rough, now they can deal with it. And I was right about the kids. It gives depth to their view of their parents." She seemed pleased that she had been right, not at all disturbed by the throngs outside. "Wouldn't you like to go back and—"

"Two weeks in Warren Denarett's yard, and I can't even get them for trespassing. Why, why, will you tell me, do we seem to have so many more people out there than the Aldridges do? There are at least a hundred people in our yard."

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"Thirty-eight, unless some new ones have just arrived. It's an old house. A lot of families have lived here. Maybe some had several children, and now they're all coming back."

"I will not stand for it. I will not," said Warren, with only a semblance of control. "They will leave. Now."

He marched out the kitchen door but never had a chance to leave the back step, for a man with a receding hairline and small dark eyes, a porcine man, grabbed him by the arms.

"You've changed the shutters. The curtains in the living room are all wrong for it. There's no woodpile, man! Where's your woodpile by the back door? You've got a fireplace; you've got to have a woodpile!"

Warren opened his mouth to scream for help, but the man released his grip and sat down on the step, huddling into an even more porcine shape.

"It's the same wherever I go," he whined. "In Davenport, they built a fence so you couldn't see the river. In Omaha, they turned the place into a freakish art gallery. In Little Rock . . . " Warren heard a whimper from the man. "In Little Rock, they tore it down."

Warren went inside. "This isn't working for everyone, you know," he said to Gina, trying to sound calm. But his breath was rushing in and out.

"Well, there's bound to be a backlash of some sort," she said from within the chilly embrace of the refreezerator door. "There is with almost anything."

"*What* a person is—that's important," Warren said, his voice still breathy but coming under control, "not *where* he is and not *where* he has been. I myself feel no compulsion to dredge up the past," he expounded more surely to Gina and the kitchen in general. "It depends on a certain stability, a certain contentment with oneself. Of course I like this house, I'm comfortable here, but I could leave it tomorrow, provided, of course, I made a good profit on it."

"You're comfortable? I'm not," said Gina. "I've never felt as if I actually lived in this house."

"You've never liked any place we've lived, Gina," said Warren acidly. "Each one has been nicer than the one before, and none of them has been right for you."

"Only the farmplace where I was a child seemed like home." She had straightened to look at him over the appliance door, and her gray eyes were perfectly calm. "I'm not alone in that, or why do we have all these poor people out there looking for what they

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lost? If you can be comfortable anywhere, you're the exception," she said, diving back into the refreezerator.

"Yes, I believe you're right," Warren went on, as if the last bit of conversation had not taken place. "A backlash. In a few weeks, maybe days, there'll be some suicides, and the whole practice will be labeled dangerous. It will pass."

It did not pass that quickly, but, Warren asked himself, what could be done about it? He first tried ordering everyone off the property, but the people in the yard, every last one of them, turned toward him, some menacingly, he thought. They assumed it was their right to stand on his lawn and look in his windows. What could a homeowner do when the pursuit of personal history had become a national pastime?

A sign listing viewing times, two to four P.M., did no good. Finally, Warren thought of the fifteen-minute time limit. Anyone could understand the need to make room for newcomers who were, after all, almost brothers and sisters in this pursuit. Whenever Warren was at home, he monitored the visitors with a forced cheerfulness.

He had little time to read. Even when there was a hiatus in the yard-trekking, he could not settle down to reading on the porch. As soon as he tried, a troupe of people pulled up to the curb, if not the curb in front of the house, then the one in his mind, spilling out and meandering between his eyes and the print. Technical journals, novels, and nonfiction piled up. Though he could not read them, he kept acquiring them, haunting bookstores and newsstands and buying, buying, as if he were buying the promise that he would once again be able to read and enjoy. Then the tower of reading material mocked him, teetered dangerously on some plane in his mind while he was at work, taunted him with denial.

Nights were impossible. Not because there were people outside, although a few sometimes stayed late to chase lightning bugs; they generally cleared out by ten. But ever since the afternoon when Warren found the man on the ladder looking in his upstairs study window, he had not slept well.

Often in that buffer state between waking and sleeping, a territory that had expanded immensely for him in the past few weeks, he imagined people in the house. Children rattled toys in his study, played splashing games at the bathroom sink, clattered down the stairs. Strange women dealt with tomato preserves in the kitchen, and families had Thanksgiving reunions around his

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dining room table. Sometimes laughter drifted up from the barbecue patio; the distant clink of ice in glasses came across the lawn. A dog scratched at the back door.

Of course, he knew the only real sounds were those of traffic around Taco-Two and the soft whir of the air moderator. But the phantom noises often pulled him back to wakefulness, and then he would get up and check the house, padding down to the dark basement and back through the first floor, where the streetglow cast window-patterns on the living room carpet. He tugged at door handles to make sure everything was locked fast. He studied the yard, watching for movement.

Then he would climb the stairs again, once freezing in terror at the spectacle of a man in the upper hallway, a ghostly man in the dimness, a man of medium height, with sad moustache and hair of no apparent color and dressed in almost nothing. It was Warren Denarett, the image of himself in the full-length mirror at the entrance to the bedroom.

Another time he encountered Gina and gave an involuntary "*huh!*" as she passed him on her way to the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the bed for a while, trembling, wondering why he had not recognized this child-shaped person as his wife. Was it her long hair, loose about her shoulders instead of pinned up as she wore it in the daytime? Was it new pajamas, ruffled like a child's?

And once, in trying to sleep, he counted the places he himself had lived. This recital involved a dreary series of apartments peopled with an ever-changing cast of foster parents and pseudo-siblings, neighborhoods that merged with the frequency of transfer from one household to another. People, rooms, houses—they seemed to be interchangeable in his memory. There were few friends. If he could remember even one fact about some child he had known, that seemed a miracle. Some had names but no faces for him now; others were faces without names.

The college where he'd had a scholarship was here in this city; he passed the old dormitory frequently on his way to work, and it held no mysteries for him. He and Gina had lived in several apartments and in one house before this one; he could picture her well in those places, which were so small that the two of them were often in the same room all evening. He'd always read, though, in the dingy apartments and the cracker-box house, and she had . . . well, she had been there, doing something. But hadn't they been together? Hadn't there been a sort of companionable feeling then?

All this pillow rambling didn't give him a clue to what the

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people were doing in his yard, what they were finding. Dementia! Start a fad, and everyone joins in, not stopping to reason it out. Any one place on this earth could never be, should never be, of such importance.

"Now hurry, we have only five more minutes here," the tall red-haired woman said to her freckled child.

Warren almost let it pass, but he was a scrupulous timekeeper, and he was feeling optimistic, almost friendly, on this Saturday morning. The crowds had thinned out the past few days. "Madam, you still have ten minutes left. You've been here five."

"Thank you, but we can stay only ten, total."

He felt an inexplicable exasperation, the hot flush of indignation. His house sparkled in the sun; the yard was at the height of seasonal perfection, blooming everywhere.

"How can you see this fine old home in only ten minutes?"

"I'm sorry," the woman said kindly, "but my family moved often when I was young. We have five other houses to see in the city alone this morning, and then it's on to Red Oak this afternoon." She ran across the lawn to her son, pointing out something about the roof to him. In the muffled garble of words escaping to Warren, only "Santa Claus" was clear.

If he was encouraged by the falling tallies of lawn-trompers, he was conversely outraged when he came home one evening to find a stream of people leaving the house by the front door, with Gina graciously bidding them goodbye.

She bore his torrent of words with a tolerant sideways look and then said, "There weren't that many left, and I could tell they were longing to see inside. I suggested it to them. Most people are too polite to ask."

Warren's rage was not often expressed, and when he trotted it out and galloped it around the track, he was usually left without an accurate record of the race. Something about rights, privacy, having no right to, wear and tear on—all he knew was it had a purgative effect, leaving him unusually calm afterward. Meanwhile, Gina, without reaction, had gone upstairs.

So it was in a quieter mood and with only a slightly accusing tone that he was able to call up to her a few minutes later, "Gina, why is there a woman crying on my screened porch?"

"They all left; I counted." Her answer floated down, no anger in it.

"Well, you must have left the door unhooked. Please come down and get rid of her."

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Her answer was not expressed in words but in her person, descending the stairs with several bags and a suitcase.

"It's nothing you said, Warren," she told him, setting the largest suitcase on the dark tiled hall floor and going through her purse. "It's just that I've got to go back to Reinbeck, to the farmplace, and then to Waterloo. It's best to go now, before all this is over, so people will understand why I'm there." She pulled out her keys.

She was on her way out the front door. She seemed even stranger to him now than that night-garbed childwife in the midnight hallway, and he did not go after her.

But then there was the woman on his screened porch.

"I'm sorry," she said as he stepped down from the living room. "I know I shouldn't have come in, but the door wasn't hooked, and I couldn't resist."

She was pale, fragile-looking. Warren hesitated to speak, feeling words might shatter her; he'd have to effect her exodus very gently. He wasn't used to dealing with women other than Gina, and Gina rarely cried. Could tears be followed by hysteria? Gina should have taken care of this before she left. He stood uncertainly. He put his hands in his pockets.

Gina was gone—surely just for a few days. Meanwhile, this woman. What was she saying? About a dream?

" . . . last week. I was standing in my old room up above this porch, looking down across the back yard at night. The moon was making wonderful shadows through the trees. And then it changed. It was daytime and fall, and all the leaves were gold and red, and I had on a plaid school dress. Then it changed again, and I was looking into snow. Now I live where there isn't any snow at all, ever. Aren't other people's dreams absolutely boring?" She laughed, and Warren realized he must have had the dullest expression on his face. "I'm sorry," the woman added, embarrassed now. She sat down on the edge of the like-new chair to open her purse.

Warren eased into the other chair.

"I'm leaving," she said, pulling out a fresh tissue.

Why had Gina taken all those bags with her? Why had she never sat in that other chair on this porch with him? Gina felt . . . she had never felt as if she lived here. Maybe she was justified in saying that. After they'd moved in, the house had separated them, as one separates a yolk from the white of an egg. She had faded. Now she was fading faster, toward Reinbeck.

"I always think of this porch and kittens," the woman was saying. "When our cat had kittens, Mom put them all out here,

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and I'd come out to play with them. She fed the cats outside, out there on the walk. You know what I remember about rain? The plink of it in a china dish, the cat's milk dish. Every time it rained there'd be that sound below my window."

"Ah?" said Warren. The image of Gina was slipping away. What was the woman saying, rain and cats?

"I used to sleep out here in summer," she said, blotting her face. "Not because I had to. I just liked being out here. Over there it was all woods." She waved a slender hand toward Taco-Two.

"Woods? Over there?" Warren looked toward the poplars.

"Yes. And the night sounds from it were amazing." There was a reverence in her voice. "This porch was my favorite place."

"It was?" Children, cats, sunlight through the screen, looking out into the rain, listening to the night noises. Warren drew it slowly through his mind, which seemed to be afflicted with inertia. Then came a flash of a yellowish room where the cracks in the wall formed a boogieman. Where had that been? "Your favorite place?"

"Out of all the places I've lived. Almost everything good I remember centers around this porch. There was a sort of . . . consciousness of it beneath me as I slept in my room up there. Mornings in summer, I brought my breakfast out. And lunch. I couldn't get away with dinner." Warren thought of all the desserts he'd eaten here, but she was going on. "Mom thought I was too young to sleep on the porch, but I talked her into it one evening. After I was asleep, Dad carried me upstairs. But later, I stayed all night. Sometimes I was here almost around the clock. I wanted it to be year-round. I remember coming out in late September, shivering, trying to make the experience last. I guess I could have lived out here."

Warren let out a laugh. "Well! Live out here!" Suddenly the fragrance from the yard pressed in on him; his eyes watered.

Her voice was falling to soft, dreamy depths. "I'd lie awake and look out at the stars, watch the lights in the house next door and the people moving around the rooms. I'd see the lights go out, and the stars would be brighter . . . "

It was fitting together, something without words in his mind. His own childhood seemed erased. Hers was bright and sinuous, beautiful and compelling, now curving, recurving, now attaching itself to his first recollection of this porch, the evening he had placed his new chair and sat down to read here. It fit, it joined. He felt he had always been here.

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She shifted in her chair, opened her purse. "I am sorry, I *am*," she was saying. "I'm sorry to have kept you."

Once more, he smelled the heavy scent of roses. He loved it. He loved it here. And he had always loved it.

"But I want to thank you," she was saying. "You probably get a lot of this, with the age of this house and all the people who've lived here. I live in a new building, so I can't say I've had to put up with it too."

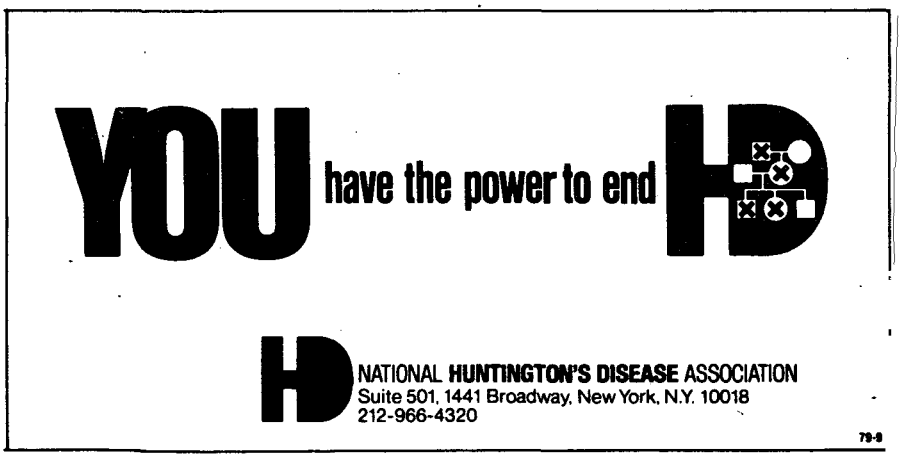
There was a pause, filled with bird sounds and traffic noise from beyond the poplars. He realized, belatedly, that he should reply.

"No, no, it's quite all right," he said hurriedly. "Thank you . . . for coming." No, he couldn't very well thank this person for what she'd really done, for her strange and curious gift. He wanted her to leave so he could examine it, this gift of childhood, so he could hold it to him.

She stood up, closing her purse and heading for the door. A thought turned her back, and she smiled. "Reading! How could I forget that? I must have read hundreds of books on this porch."

Warren stood up, perhaps too quickly. He managed to speak politely, formally, but his voice was filled with pride and love. A special love of place.

"Would you care to see the rest of the house?" ●



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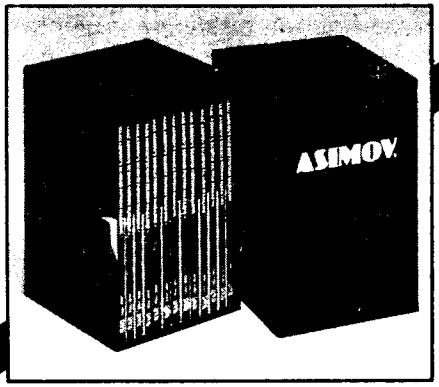

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"Night Win"
is Ms. Kress's
third story in *IAsfm*,
her most recent being
"Against a
Crooked Stile"
in the May 1979 issue. Her
first novel,
The Prince of Morning Bells,
appeared last year
from Timescape.

art: Robert Walters

by Nancy Kress

NIGHT WIN

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The river dissolved. One minute it tore through high, dim banks booming with the rapids around the bend; the next it lifted and spread, flooding the air with gray particles that turned from water to smoke to grainy nothingness behind Rachel's eyelids, nothingness spreading in an even wash like blindness like sleep like entropy like stillness like——

"Rachel! Rachel!"

——nothingness——

"Rachel!"

Her ear muffs were yanked off so quickly that the flexible metal band snapped against her temple. She put up one hand to rub the temple, at first unaware that she did so, eyes focusing more slowly than hand. Always the eyes more slowly; the hand remembered first, not deceived. Instinct? It must be instinct. Over her chair, Don's thin body leaned urgently. Her ear muffs dangled from his left hand. Even through the wispy nothingness she could feel the tautness in his body, gone sharp as a bowstring. If she touched him she would bleed.

"Rachel?"

The hospital room sprang into focus: metal bed, tightly woven blue blanket, blue-flowered drapes drawn against the night, miniature plants in a green ceramic pot, a gift from somebody. Dracaena, jade plant, philodendron, schefflera. The schefflera was wilting; probably over-watered. Under the blue blanket Rachel could see Mrs. Angstrom lying still, worn out with not dying.

"Are you all *right?*"

"I——lost it," Rachel said. She closed her eyes, then forced them open again. Sounds, always the last to focus, came leaking in from the corridor: a linen cart rolling by, an elevator door opening with a soft whoosh of air. At the nurse's station around the corner and down the hall someone chuckled. A second later a different voice murmured, the words indecipherable as a foreign language. Somewhere a phone rang.

"Rachel——can you get back In?"

"Can you?"

"Yes. But now. It has to be now."

Sweat beaded on his upper lip. One hand, Rachel saw, was shaking. Always the hands—even for Don, who had so much control she sometimes hated him.

"It wasn't like the last time," Rachel said slowly. "This was——nothingness. Just nothingness. I lost it to nothingness." Her big body shuddered.

"There's no *time.* It has to be *now!*"

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In the bed Mrs. Angstrom groaned and turned over.

"All right," Rachel said. "All *right*. I'm ready."

Don took her hand. She pulled it away, but then forced herself to leave it in his. He was right; she needed the extra contact, even at the price of the tactile distraction. His fingers were spindly and cold. With her free hand Rachel pulled the ear muffs over her head, leaned back, and closed her eyes.

She slipped In.

The raft had drifted farther towards the rapids—how had it gotten so far downstream? Don was splashing towards it, only his bony, naked shoulders and bobbing head showing above the slimy black water. Another ten yards and he would reach the raft, but the water flowed faster here and his splashing was not narrowing the distance. On the raft Mrs. Angstrom screamed, but Rachel heard no sound; the woman's mouth was a silent black O. Rachel tried to move towards Don, but the water pressed in, stinging like needles. Cold—it was so cold. She tried to raise the temperature, but the water would not warm. Don must need it this cold; she couldn't affect it at all.

Ahead of her Don reached the raft and grasped it with both hands at one corner. For a second Rachel could feel the wood, water-logged and spongy, bucking under his hands. *Hands—not now! Don't think of hands now!* Don braced himself against an underwater rock, leaning backwards until his weight balanced the forward drag of the current against the raft, and called back over his shoulder for Rachel to help pull.

Her body, so big and ponderous on land, felt light in the water. Her breasts, blue-veined and fatty, floated in front of her. But the stinging was growing even worse; the water was so cold it burned. Rachel struggled to make herself take a step, to move through the black water over the unseen sand underneath. Just as she succeeded in lifting her naked foot and shoving it forward, a fish swam by her legs.

Startled, she stopped moving. A *fish?* There couldn't be a fish, not here, not in this river. And it was beautiful—tapering slim shape and crimson dark scales, streaking across the dark water. But how could a fish have been—

"Rachel!"

"I'm coming!"

She splashed forward, flailing her arms. The raft had swung sidewise under Don's backward pull. One corner pointed directly down the river, like a prow. Mrs. Angstrom was still screaming, and now Rachel could hear her over the rapids, a shrill scream

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with a scraping flutter in it, doubling and redoubling in echoes off the bluffs that crowded the river on both sides. Around her the slimy water moved faster, singing darkly.

Don's skin felt clammy with gooseflesh. Rachel forced her hands around his waist and threw her weight backwards. He staggered, but then caught her rhythm and stepped back with her over the jagged rocks. (Jagged rocks? It had been sand when she started. Rocks, cold——why did he make everything as goddamn *hard* as possible?) The muscles in the back of Don's neck knotted with each step. Slowly the raft eased backward, moving upstream, against the current.

Mrs. Angstrom went on screaming.

They were almost back to where Rachel stood before, angling in towards a rock shelf at the foot of the bluff, when a fish swam by again. Suddenly there were two of them, slashing the coldness with bright streaks of warm color. She tried to yell to Don to look at the fish, but he didn't turn his head. Wood chips from the raft, smelling of rot and slime, hung in his hair.

How quick the fish were! How alive and yet not alive, glowing with passionate flashes of red, more intense than any color she had ever seen. More intense than any being she had ever seen——pure, whole, free, and with a passion glimpsed only in night dreams. Passionately red. Streaking across the night blackness, burning deeper and deeper, the searing crimson flaring out like a nova until the water itself was warmed. How could she have thought it was cold? It was only cold until you were used to it, then warm and bright with the glow, the yearning, the flowing between your legs like black velvet. Red fins and slim tapering bodies leading you down into the sweet silent water, the longed-for, half-remembered temperature, salty and thick, warm as blood.

She let go of Don and slipped in a slow sliding curve under the blood-warm water.

"MorMedic Campbell. Come on, now, wake up. This is Nurse Ferrier. Wake up, now."

The young voice trying to be old went on and on, patiently. Rachel turned over and tried to pull the blanket over her head.

"None of that. Come on, MorMedic——Rachel. Wake up, now. Please wake up."

A hand began slapping her hesitantly on the cheeks, first the left one, then the right. When Rachel reached up to bat the hand away it caught her wrist and pulled a little.

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"Rachel, come on. You're supposed to wake up now."

"I'm awake."

"Then open your eyes. Please open your eyes."

The face was leaning over her, blocking the window. Chubby cheeks, blond curls, oily skin: Rachel recognized her as the latest of the young nurses who followed Don around, smiling wistfully. Sarah, Sandy——Susan. Susan something. The nurse moved her head and Rachel was assaulted by sunlight, then memory. Abruptly she sat up.

"Mrs. Angstrom——"

"Alive. The fever broke. She's over the worst."

"She'll make it?"

"The prognosis is hopeful," the nurse said primly. The corners of her young mouth turned down. Rachel saw the grimace for what it was: the involuntary distrust of the technician of the body for the technician of the mind, of the concrete for the shadowy, of the dutifully licensed for the hired outsider. Probably Nurse Ferrier didn't even notice what her mouth was doing; that didn't help.

Why the hell were they like that? It seemed to Rachel that nearly all of them, all the hospital personnel and the academic researchers and even the next-of-kin who paid for the services of a Mortality Medical Team, spent most of their living energies in wilful, edgy misunderstanding of what that team did.

Not that there was much about metaphorical healing that was concrete enough *to* understand. So many unknowns: how did MorMedics ease themselves into synchronous trance? How did they wordlessly choose and construct a metaphor for death, and then ensnare the minds of the dying into becoming passive participants in the metaphor? How did they pull the dying back from the idea of death, and why should the body often follow the idea? Often, so often, but not always. Why not always? Why at all? Why this, why that, why was this stupid girl standing here blushing at her, why, why——

Why did I let go of the raft?

"Of course," Susan Ferrier said awkwardly, "I know I don't understand any of it. I didn't mean to imply——I know that Don——MorMedic Bareis—he does wonderful work. So many people have said they——not that there's any way of knowing it wasn't just the basic medical care that wasn't really the cause for—but he really does give it everything he's got. He really tries. And you, too, of course," she added hastily.

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"Of course," Rachel said sourly, and swung her heavy legs over the side of the bed.

"Let me help you. Do you feel all right?"

"*You* couldn't do anything about it if I didn't," Rachel said, and waited for the girl to take offense. But instead she smiled, a smile so patient and open that it changed her whole face, making even the bad skin a shiny reflection for the sunlight that filled the room, a meek acceptance of whatever was offered. Rachel felt dimly ashamed; she scowled and looked away.

Don lay in an empty bed parked in an unused alcove by the linen room. He was still asleep. Lying on his left side, his legs drawn up, he looked even smaller than usual. Where did it come from, all that power in that delicate, balding skull with the last sideburns in Boston? His right shoulder hunched up toward his chin; Rachel could see where the collarbone, chicken-skinny, met the shoulder. Such delicate shoulders; so much unseen, over-regulated power.

Holding those shoulders in her arms had never been able to excite her. She had tried——God knows she had tried, wanting to make their obligatory intercourse something more than the required playing through of common sexual metaphors. Her metaphors, violent and restless, had repelled him; his metaphors, stately and secretive, had bored her. Or maybe his had never really surfaced at all, never really broken through all that awesome control. Always that control, that careful consideration of ends rather than means. Not that she didn't admire it professionally, of course. But in all six months that they had lived together, she had never had an orgasm. She had come to know Don through and through, and nowhere had she found that abandonment, that complexity, that passionate struggle that might have made her respond to him. She had lain next to him, holding him as she gazed out his window at the night clouds whipping over Boston Bay, and it had been like holding a child in her arms.

But, free of sexual metaphors, they had made such ideal working partners! His the initiation and control, hers the passion and energy. They were the best team on the East Coast, really; once they had worked at an operation on a former president of United Europe. But that had been years ago; she had never lost the metaphor then, never given in to——what?

Leaning against the wall of the linen room, Rachel felt the sour little bubbles rise in her stomach, and scowled. She hated, above all else, the rare times she felt afraid.

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Don was awake. He lay looking at her, his light gray eyes compassionate.

"I'm sorry, Don. I lost it. I was with you and then I just . . . lost it."

"Rachel——"

"No. Don't. I know."

He looked away from her, into the linen room. Crumpled sheets lay in a pile on the floor. His small, delicate-veined hand clenched at his side, and she spoke quickly, anything, before he could speak.

"How did you get the raft to shore?"

"I didn't."

"Then——"

"It happened to snag on a rock, so I left it to pull you out. The rock wasn't mine. Yours?"

"You know better than that."

"Then it must have been hers. Latent ability, maybe, I don't know——it was just sheer luck. The one-in-a-thousand chance. Not something I could count on again. Rachel——"

"Was I hard to get out?"

"No. You had already swallowed enough water by the time I could grab you."

"Did Mrs. Angstrom try at all to——"

"Rachel. Stop it."

"Don't tell me what I can ask or not ask about a——"

"I can't work with you any more."

She looked at him. Somewhere, down the hall, around a corner where she couldn't see, a patient coughed.

"Don't look at me like that, Rachel. Rachel——"

Why were people always doing that, always starting their speeches to her with her name? Nobody else was addressed so much by name. Did they think it gained them something: time, her attention, her favor? Fools. She hated her name. "Rachel, weeping for her children, because they are no more . . . " She fought, not wept. It was the wrong metaphor.

"Rachel, at least listen to me. To start with, you need some time off, a few weeks to rest. Tiredness——"

"If you knew I was tired, why did you use the river? You know I have trouble with all the water constructs, we've been over this a hundred times, yet you go right ahead and use it anyway, you don't seem to——"

"Don't attack, Rachel. Attacking won't help."

" 'Attack'. God, you even *talk* in metaphors."

He passed a hand over his eyes, but he wasn't deterred. They

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had worked together for fourteen years, had been mortal friends for twelve.

"A rest would do you——"

"No, it wouldn't. I'd go crazy. I need to work, you know that!"

"You could do some of your gardening, take a trip. Visit your sister in Detroit."

"I can't stand my sister in Detroit. I need to work."

"So take a job at an algae factory!" Don snapped, and despite the panic in her stomach, Rachel grinned. It still had the power to surprise her, this unexpected exasperation that could break the surface of his bland, slow patience. Impulsively she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"No, Rachel. I mean it. Mrs. Angstrom, and last week the brain surgery. Shapiro."

"They both pulled through!"

"You deserted me in the middle. Shapiro wasn't water, either."

It had been night, the oldest metaphor of all. Don and she had crouched on a vast plain, plying enormous bellows, pumping toward a tiny spark of fire on a pile of messy ashes. They leaned on hands and knees to blow with exhausted breaths until the veins in her cheeks swelled and popped. The plain had been dark, cave-coffin-womb dark, except for that wavering spark from the inert mass on the operating table. And then suddenly Rachel had seen how much more beautiful the velvety darkness was, how much more pregnant with mysterious huntings and yearned-for promises, than the grotesque shadows cast by the grubby little spark. The most natural, the rightest thing in the world, was to turn her back on the dingy ashes and face the spacious, gravid, sweet-scented dark, just face it and listen for what it surely had to whisper to her, what unfettered vast secrets——she hated O.R. work, anyway. The electronic instruments were a subtle distraction, their rhythms never exactly matching the ones Don set, and so were all those others, the endless personnel which conventional medicine thought it needed, moving and talking and breathing and filling up the crowded room with their petty static. It was no wonder she'd lost the metaphor! So many of them, always, you'd think an operation was a goddamn football game, all spectators welcome. Next time she should sell tickets. Next time she——

"You don't just need a rest, anyway, Rachel. Let's not argue about the rest. What you need, the second thing——the most important thing——is an analysis."

"No."

"This is serious. I can't risk your going out on me with a patient

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again. Will you at least talk to a psychiatrist about this weird death wish——"

"Spare me the pop jargon!"

"If you——"

"Why do you push me on the same stupid thing? We've been over this a hundred times! No, no, no!"

Don sat up in the bed. The blanket slipped and Rachel saw the thin gray scar on his chest, souvenir of a mugging in the Public Gardens on his way home from an emergency night operation. Over the years she had raged against that chest, storming as various men had let her down, had turned out to be only pygmy gusts instead of the nature-shaping gales she had thought them, had after all not been enough for her. Not been *large* enough. Don had always been there, always listened, contained and patient, waiting for the passing of emotional storms he never shared.

"I push you on the same thing because I *have* to, Rachel. Now be rational. If you go under when we're on a crucial case where I can't let——"

"Analysis won't help!"

"How can you say that when you haven't even——"

"No, damn it! No, no, no!"

"Rachel——if you don't have an analysis you don't work with me."

"Fine! I'll find another partner!"

He drew a deep breath. The scar on his chest quivered under the fluorescent light.

"If you don't have an analysis, you don't work."

"You can't——"

"Yes. I can."

She flung out one arm, the gesture meaningless, and struck a shelf beside her. Glass shattered; metal clattered to the floor. Unheeding, Don looked at her directly, those gray eyes that absorbed light steady in his delicate face. He looked absurd, like a child playing king, playing petty dictator, playing with the only thing in her stupid life vital enough to mean anything. He looked like a scrawny chicken, trying to outface a falling cliff. She could snap those twiggy little bones with one hand, she could crush him right where he lay.

"See the psychiatrist."

"Don't talk to *me* with that mealy-mouth superiority! Didn't you ever make a mistake, didn't you ever mess up a construct?"

"No, I didn't. Lives are at stake."

"God, you're so smug! So sure-of-yourself prissy *smug!*"

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"See the psychiatrist. I know what you're thinking, Rachel——but just because it happened to D'Amato doesn't mean it'll happen to you."

"And do you know what D'Amato's doing now?" Rachel shouted. "Selling life insurance! Gone, all gone, as soon as some Freud-fly started poking around——not even *you* know how to get In, and you're an initiator! Not even you——"

Susan Ferrier stood in the hall, in a patch of sunlight crawling with dust motes, her hand to her mouth. Rachel jerked around and stared fiercely, pointlessly, into the linen room, her back to both of them. She could never work alone. Whatever it took to make that initial link, that catching of the unguarded dying that drew in their what?——essence? will to live? soul? Nobody knew, that was the whole damn *point*——whatever it took, she didn't have it. She was only the raw energy, the lightning without a ship's mast, the flooding river, rampaging lost beyond its banks.

"Rachel, see the psychiatrist."

Under his even tone she heard the jaggedness that might have been pain, but when she turned his face was still controlled, closed as a fortress. Beyond him Susan Ferrier had not moved, her hand still to her mouth in the dusty sunshine. They were both such small people, such controlled, bodiless, sunlit people, so content with what they had . . . Rachel pushed past them, shoving Susan out of the way with one hand.

"I need you, Rachel," Don said. He had climbed out of bed and stood naked on the tile floor; the top of his head reached her chin. He looked defenseless, vulnerable——deliberately vulnerable? On the floor his bony toes splayed outward.

"I need you."

"I'd take you Under first!"

He shook his head, but whether to deny her words or just to deflect them, Rachel didn't see. She kept on pushing down the hall, not looking back, the sunlight white and placid behind her.

She began to remember her dreams. That had never happened when she was working; it had been years since dreams had made the crossing to her conscious mind. In the night she would sit up and cry out, waking herself, sweat clammy under her nightgown. Her hands would be clenching the metal bed frame so hard that welts would stay on her palms for hours. Yet the dreams themselves were calm, ordinary: she was picking a bouquet of early asters in the garden, she was stirring the rice in its enameled pot on the stove, she was painting a window frame in her tiny Com-

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monwealth Avenue apartment. Sunshine washed through the window and over the wet paint, making moving shadows where her hand swished back and forth. The paint smelled clean and permanent, like glue. When the frame was painted, she cleaned her brush in warm water, slapping the bristles back and forth, each separate bristle distinct and pleasantly tingling against her hands.

Hands——always hands. But she woke screaming.

During the day Rachel worked in the garden. She had chosen the shabby, cramped apartment on Commonwealth Avenue for its fenced garden, a luxury left over from the time when the Back Bay had been a pleasant, safe part of the city. Now it was neither; fights and muggings and curses echoed nightly over her wooden fence. But——there was the garden, and a tiny redwood sundeck that overlooked it. She worked frantically, jabbing her spade with the rapid-fire rhythm of a jack-hammer, or a machine gun. "Slow down, Rachel," Don said from the sun-deck, a drink in his hand. "Slow down, you don't have to plant Eden in one afternoon." She scowled at the image from ten years ago and hoed the ground around her tomatoes as if rescuing them from strangulation. "Take it easy," the image said. "All that storm and strife could kill you."

At night she dreamed of fixing a pipe. She could feel her hands grip the wrench as it tightened on the joint collars. She woke screaming.

After a few weeks the gardening ran out. There was only so much to do. The beans had all been propped on poles; the cigarette butts and beer cans passersby had tossed over the fence had all been cleared out; the flowers had all been pruned. Rachel's neighbors, made uneasy by the fierce order of her marigolds and the harsh measure of her scowl, left her alone.

She sat up later and later. All the curtains were drawn tightly and pinned over closed windows. She did not trust herself to even smell the summer night, heavy with lush promise——instead she watched TV news shows, hospital shows, old space dramas and even older Westerns. People were laser-fried by aliens and died. People fell off horses and died. People contracted odd strains of mutated viruses and died. Rachel watched it all, wrapped in an old hand-knitted afghan, glaring at the TV. Contestants won refrigerators, diplomats made the shuttle trip to the moon, patients fought off the odd mutated viruses and lived. Once, during a news segment about a spectacular transplant operation, she glimpsed Don in the background of the O.R., looking small and exhausted.

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Not even that made her turn off the TV. She let it all wash over her, staying with it right to the early morning sex shows, wanting only to stay awake, not to sleep, not to dream the calm, ordinary, useful dreams.

"MorMedic Campbell?"

"Nurse Ferrier."

"May I come in?"

"No."

Susan Ferrier blinked, whether at the rudeness or Rachel's appearance, Rachel couldn't tell. She knew how she looked. Soiled bathrobe, uncombed hair, pasty skin with dark circles under the eyes——hadn't missed a cliché, had she? The whole theatrical repertoire of panic. Touched all the bases. At the absurdity of this flash of perverted vanity, Rachel smiled sourly and Susan, mistaking the smile, walked in.

"It's about——well, about Don. I see him around the hospital, and he always looks so tired. Just spent. I know I probably shouldn't interfere, MorMedic——Rachel——"

"MorMedic."

The girl flushed. "Working alone is just too *much* for him. It's really none of my business——"

"No. It's not."

"——but he can't find another assistant, and frankly, I'm worried about him. He needs another assistant. He really does. But there aren't too many of——of you."

Rachel walked to the stove. She was out of coffee. A mug lay on its side, the last dregs soggy in the bottom. Three brown bags of garbage rotted in the sunshine from the window. She had just not been much interested in removing them. Through the glass, she could see a dented beer can caught in the rose bush.

"Of us what?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You don't have it. Not too many of us what? Death rats? Decay-diddlers? Infidels? Frauds? What exactly do you think MorMedics are, Nurse Ferrier?"

"Mental healers," Susan said quietly. Rachel saw what she had missed before: dignity. The girl was timid, washed-out, bland, but she had dignity.

"Faith healers. But not *their* faith——ours. Does Don know you're here?"

"No. But——"

"Presumptuous, then, isn't it?"

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"I just thought——"

"No. You didn't."

Susan drew a deep breath. Her oily skin mottled with red. "I'm not going to fence with you. I don't know what you're so angry about all the time, anyway. I don't know why you never relax, never——but Don lost three this week. All of them should have made it. One was an eight-year-old boy."

Rachel sat down. She lowered herself into a chair slowly, back straight, as if something were fragile.

"Tell me."

"The first one was on Tuesday. My head nurse said it was a gastric tumor, and the surgeon——"

"Not *that*. What was Don using with the kid."

Susan hesitated. "I don't know, exactly. He wouldn't talk about it afterwards, even though he was really upset. But somebody said it was something about a cliff."

She could feel it. Hauling the child in a rope-sling up the sheer face of the mountain, the body groggy but not completely inert, so that it flailed and groaned at the end of the rope. An eight-year-old would be heavy, on those thin shoulders. Because he was Don, it would be cold. The snow would whip past his goggles, sometimes blinding him to the ledge above, that safe ledge which, if he only could reach it, would let him keep the kid safe——let him put the small body in the back near the rocks, under the overhang, and shield it from the wind with his own body. Would let him pull off his gloves and wipe the blood off hands raw from hauling on ropes and hammering in spikes for hours. It would have been hours. And then the unexpected shift of the rope, the child sickeningly light for the blind moment before the snow gusted and Don could see the fall, slow and unstoppable as the fall of night. At the base of the cliff, in the waiting room, the parents who had hired Don would lift their eyes from unread magazines, to scan his face as he walked toward them. And he would have to tell them.

"MorMedic Campbell?"

"But Carl D'Amato is selling *life* insurance!"

"Who?"

Rachel closed her eyes. When she didn't answer Susan squirmed a little, an abortive half-moment that in another girl might have been a shrug, or a shoulder-flick of impatience, or a plea for attention.

"The third case was O.R. A knife-fight victim. Actually, the

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patient came through the surgery and we thought he would make it, but Don was still with him in post-op, and he was using the——"

"No. Don't tell me."

"Rachel——"

"Don't *tell* me!"

Sunshine streamed in the window. Susan stood still, waiting. Rachel fidgeted, stacking the salt shaker on top of the pepper, ringing both with torn bits of advertising circular, making and unmaking frenetic designs her intent eyes did not even see. The child fell from the cliff.

"All right. I'll see your psychiatrist."

"Oh, Don will be so——"

"Yes. Set it up for tomorrow."

"Maybe today the doctor could fit in a——"

"*Tomorrow.*"

The girl nodded. They looked at each other across the littered table, Susan smiling uncertainly, Rachel fierce. There was nothing else to say. They might have been two different species, circling each other warily around the water hole of Rachel's shabby kitchen. A fly buzzed monotonously across the sunlit silence.

"Well, I guess I better be——"

"What is death to you?" Rachel asked abruptly, and waited. She expected an evasion or an embarrassed stare, something that would justify her dislike. But again Susan surprised her. She answered promptly, meeting Rachel's eyes directly, her uncertain smile gone.

"The enemy."

"Always?"

"Of course." The girl's eyes widened suddenly. "Isn't it always to——"

"Go home, Nurse Ferrier."

"But——"

"Go *home.*"

Now even watching TV was impossible. Her mind skipped crazily, missing whole chunks of plot, entire countries' worth of news.

"——and now the NBS newsbreak. Fighting has intensified along the Niger-Barmou border, with losses estimated as high as 4,000 men, women and children. A high official in nearby Mali, who declined to be identified, confirmed reports that both sides in the conflict have employed genetically altered bacteria in an attempt to gain control——"

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Control, Rachel, control. You might be an initiator if you could just keep your own needs out of the metaphor.

And the great Don might be decent in bed if you'd just let any of yours in!

That wasn't called for.

"——called for an end to the death and destruction in a Security Council Meeting earlier today. Locally, purse-snatchings and muggings in the downtown area——"

Of course it hurt. What sort of question is that? No, don't touch there, it's still tender.

Don——what did you feel when the mugger pulled the knife?

I felt afraid.

Is that all? Nothing more complicated, more——mixed?

Of course not.

"——return you to the Himalayas and NBS coverage via telesatellite of the death-teasing struggle of seven American mountain climbers to climb the——"

Turn it off.

I want to see it.

Good God, Rachel, why?

I don't know. It's beautiful. No, it's not. It's outrageous, dangerous, big——I don't know. Don't you ever think that if you weren't a MorMedic, you might have lived that way? Pushing life to the limit?

Never. What's the point?

Does there have to be a point? Maybe they're just trying to escape all this endless cramped discontent that the rest of us live in!

I don't feel either cramped or discontent.

God, I hate your self-righteousness!

Do you? I'm sorry. But adolescent longings for some vague passionate grandeur don't interest me.

Self-righteous, mundane, limited——

"——limited to four days more of food and water, before facing a lingering death on this lonely Himalayan slope battered by winds of up to——"

Rachel turned off the TV. Silence filled the apartment. Hunched in her chair, pulling closely around her shoulders a shawl pointless in the summer heat, she stared at the blank screen. Beyond the drawn curtains she could feel the night, curling around the city like a sleek, stretching cat.

She dreamed she was building a new frame for the kitchen window. She chose the nail; under her fingers it felt cool and solid.

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She held it straight and drove it in with clean blows, her hand bringing the hammer down over the exact center of the nail head, again and again. The kitchen filled with steady, balanced pounding and with the clean smell of new wood. The windowsill was nearly finished; it lay to one side on the floor, sturdy in the sunshine. She woke screaming.

The pounding went on.

It was the wind, fiercely blowing over the vast, deserted plain outside her window, pounding at the apartment. Rachel tore open the locks on the barred grill and ran out onto the sundeck. Below her the garden lay crystalline in starlight. Beyond the fence a group of boys went by on Commonwealth Avenue, insulting each other in Spanish. A beer can was tossed over the fence, but just before it hit the dahlias the wind screamed and Rachel dropped to the deck, grabbed the railing, and hung on. She was out on the plain, alone in the howling wind. The few cottonwoods on the plain were twisted by the wind into grotesque knots. Tumbleweeds slammed into rocks that were themselves crumbled into tortured deformities by centuries of wind. A cottonwood crashed over, raking the air with branches, and the wind wailed and screamed. She would be swept away, she would be torn in half by this wind that could not exist. Not here, not at this distance, not without any contact or agreement. Not even Don could initiate such a metaphor——but it had to be Don's, he was the only one teamed to take her In at all. But how, and why? Whom was he rescuing? Who was dying?

A sudden gale force gust slapped her from behind, hurling her hair forward over her face, blinding her. Flat on her stomach, she grabbed handfuls of the tough prairie grass and tried to raise her head enough to see where the twister was. Dirt and grit blew into her eyes, then tore at her lips and tongue when she screamed.

A night moth fluttered gently over to the dahlias, folding pale wings.

She was crawling against the wind, looking for Don. She could move only a few inches at a time, grabbing fistfuls of grass to pull herself along. The grass came up at the roots; most of it was torn from her hands by the wind. Her hair jerked abruptly away from her face and pulled at the scalp so hard it hurt. Weeds and grit howled overhead, making a tearing gray sky only inches above her head.

"Don! Don!"

He was ahead of her, a dim shape in the shrieking gloom, trying to stand up. Rachel could see his body, naked to the waist, rise

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a few feet above the plain. Even as she raised her head to call again he was knocked to his knees, then spun sideways a few feet and slammed to the ground. She felt rather than heard the sharp crack of the bone at the left elbow. A second later he was trying to stagger to his knees. What was he trying to do? Where was the patient he was rescuing?

Crawling forward, Rachel reached up and pulled Don down by his belt. Instead of grasping her hand or shouting to her what was going on, Don twisted his body and clawed at her face with his one good hand. Rachel gasped and beat his hand away, finally pinning his wrist behind him. He jabbed upward with his knee but she was quicker, throwing her large body full length on top of his. Her right elbow came down on his broken one; even over the demonic wind she heard him scream. Their faces were inches apart, but when he spat at her the spittle whipped away horizontally.

"Listen! Don!"

He wouldn't hear her. Rachel's body, ten centimeters longer and twenty kilos heavier, couldn't hold his. The wind was lifting him from underneath, gusting up from the earth itself like some live, demented spirit.

"What the hell are you doing? The metaphor doesn't go like this!" Rachel screamed. Don's face strained beneath her, blank with concentration. They were three inches off the ground, locked together like rammed galleys, when Don's head fell backward; he closed his eyes and smiled as the wind slammed him in the face. Rachel hit him in the nose. Blood spurted out and was blown by the wind. She leaned over and tried to snatch at the whipping grass, and when her fist finally closed over a clump, she pulled hard. They tilted forward, her body riding his, until the grasses tore and their heads shot upward. Don's body slid sideways under Rachel's and she rolled off him, landing hard on the ground.

Free of her weight, Don rose another few inches. His broken left arm flopped like a puppet's. Rachel rolled under him and grabbed upward; her arms and then her legs wrapped around Don, dragging him down to her and tightening like a vise. The hair on the back of his head lashed at her mouth, tasting of sweat. He tried to flail backwards at her with his right arm, but she was beyond his reach, and he began prying at her hands clutching his chest. She locked her fingers and squeezed until something under them cracked.

At first her weight pulled them toward the ground, but then the impossible wind again began to blast them from underneath.

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It was warmer now, a warm raging wind as solid as tropic rapids. At three inches they began to rotate, but Rachel couldn't see through the flying hair and grit whether Don was using a twister in his senseless battle with—what? What the hell was he fighting her off to do? And where was the patient in this hellish metaphor? Above her Don gave a long, low sound: not a moan or a cry but a drawn-out breathy keening of such yearning and hope that Rachel tightened her hold until skin and blood jamed under her fingernails, and then she understood.

Don was the one dying. Dying not as a passive construct in somebody else's metaphor, but as an active participant in his own, both initiator and victim. He wasn't being tossed by the wind, he was *riding* it. Voluntarily mounting it higher and higher, back to the beginning, back where the wind blew from flowed to fell from the side of the cliff, slow and unstoppable as the fall of night. Night—night was there, mysterious and passionate and terrible enough to fill all those aches and yearnings that the glare of sunlight only exposed—

"No, damn it!" she screamed into his bloody hair. "Not you! Not *you!*"

Night. He was going to night, on top of the sky, above the wind. He was going to night, to the warmth and throbbing as the crimson blood rushed into her breasts, between her legs. Crimson flaring out like a nova spreading engulfing the longed-for, half-remembered temperature, blood-warm, salty dark—

Throwing her head forward, Rachel closed her teeth on Don's right shoulder. Blood filled her mouth, rushing in with outraged scream. The jerks of his body as he tried to rip free of her teeth tilted them crazily to the right, but not enough to flip over their locked bodies and leave her on top. The wind from beneath became stronger and louder; they were rising faster. Rachel spit out Don's shoulder—he had stopped the keening—and screamed "Fight it, damn you! You told *me* to fight it!" There was no sign he heard. She tried to make the wind colder, harsher—hail, sleet, blowing sand—anything but this seductive warmth, cleaner by the moment, lifting them higher and higher. She succeeded in lowering the temperature a few degrees, but then the demented howling began to sound more regular, swelling and pulsing and mounting to a crescendo of power that was music and thunder and orgasm, that held her transfixed, no longer fighting.

They were being blown upward and northward, at an angle, towards the night. The plain unfolded below them, tattered and unimportant. Ahead the sky throbbed black and crimson, never

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wholly one or the other but a passionate, relentless blending, flashing lightning—under her legs, clamped around Don's, Rachel could feel the force of his erection. The wind sang past them, hot and alive. Rachel cried out, didn't hear herself, and closed her eyes, smiling into the night as the night flowed into her, and then blackness came.

The first thing she became aware of was her neck. It ached; the muscles were cramped and tense. Awareness of the rest of her body followed. There was no part of her that was not bruised and battered. Slowly, Rachel opened her eyes. At the same second, she realized that the wind had stopped and the air hung as still and heavy as she and Don were hanging.

They were in the branches of a huge cottonwood. Other trees, unseen before in the dust of the twister, dotted the prairie. Don lay pressed against the cottonwood's trunk, circled and pinned by Rachel's arms. Next to the trunk her hands clung to two of the branches; it was her hands that had held them in the tree. Rachel tried to open the fingers. At first she could not, so desperately were they knotted around the solid wood. When she had forced open her scraped and cramped hands, Rachel spread them in front of her, shifted Don's weight slightly so he would not fall out of the tree, and then stared at her spread hands. She turned them over and back, palms up and palms down. It was as though they belonged to someone else, as though she had never seen them before.

Hands. Driving a nail, picking a bouquet, stirring the rice, painting a window frame. Holding on for dear life, even when the mind desired otherwise. For dear life.

In front of her spread hands, Don moaned softly.

The moth left the dahlias. It hovered over the beer can, flew to the deck, and settled on a fold of Rachel's nightgown. She sat up, looking at her hands. The moth flew away, wings pale in the moonlight as any ghost.

"Awake?"

"Yes."

"Rachel—"

"Don't." She put her finger to his lips. He looked exhausted, white ridges sagging on either side of his mouth, but whole. Irrationally, she had half-expected to see the broken arm and bitten

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shoulder. But there was only the old scar on his chest, and the new lump on his forehead where the gun butt had come down.

"It was a mugger," she said. "Just another stupid, greedy mugger. You must look like an easy target. He gave you a concussion, and you went into severe shock."

"I know. Susan Ferrier told me." His voice was flat, stretched like taut canvas over the pain underneath.

"So now you get to be a medical-first. After all, nobody else has ever initiated his own metaphor to finish killing himself. You'll be a celebrity, a real psychiatrist's dream. 'Metaphoric Death Wish Among the Metaphoric Healers: A Reverse Phenomenon.' Still want *me* to see the Freud-fly?"

Don didn't answer. After a moment Rachel looked away and said, "I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"I had it coming," Don said. "All these weeks—all these weeks I thought it was *you*. Mrs. Angstrom. Shapiro. I thought it was *you*. But you must have been picking it up all along from me, some crazy repressed fascination with death I didn't even know I had—"

"From you?" Rachel said. It was a new idea. But then she thought of the calm, ordinary dreams that brought her awake screaming, of the delicious blood-warm water, of the wind mounting upward under her. "No. No, I don't think it was only you."

"What then?"

"I think," she said slowly, "I think it was both of us. There might have been something I was picking up from you, something you couldn't express directly—*control*—but then I—it wasn't all you. No."

Don reached up and fingered the bruise on his forehead. He deliberately pushed it, Rachel saw, hard enough to hurt, and she closed her eyes.

"Don't, Don. Don't blame yourself."

"I could have killed us both. Only I didn't even know you were going to be there, in the metaphor. How did you get In? I didn't call you."

"Yes. You did. You must have, or the prairie metaphor wouldn't have reached me . . . wait. I was asleep, I was dreaming. Your trance reached my dream."

Again Don put his hands to either side of his head. This time the touch was tentative, probing; in his gray eyes brimmed a strange light, fascinated and horrified. "I wanted to die. I *wanted* it. I constructed a metaphor to hurry towards it, not to stop it—"

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"I know," Rachel said. "I know. But you also reached out to me, or your trance did. And you must have known, at some level, that I would stop you."

"Why did you? Why *did* you try to stop me? You tried to get there yourself, before—with Mrs. Angstrom. With Shapiro. Why stop me? Why didn't you join me from the beginning?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "Why did you stop *me* before, and this time want to go on yourself?"

There was a long silence. In the corridor footsteps passed. Somewhere a phone jangled softly. Don squeezed his eyes shut. "I'll have to see a psychiatrist, if I'm going to work again. We both will."

"No!"

"Rachel, I *have* to. If I don't talk about it, if I let it go, it will *grow*, don't you see? It will grow, and next time—"

"Then not to me. Don't talk about it to me."

"Ever?"

"No."

"It would help you."

"No. It would help *you*, because for you the important thing is to get it out, bring out whatever—once you get it out in the sunlight, you can take it apart and label all the parts and make each one just another tool. Then you won't be in danger of giving in. But I don't work that way. I can't."

Don chewed on his lip. A long moment went by, and Rachel held her breath.

"If you can't," he said finally, "then you can't. But maybe if I can understand what *I'm* doing, how whatever need in *me* starts you changing the metaphor—if I can get my end under control—Rachel, I need to work with you. It has to be you, now. You're the only one who would know what's happening and would stop me if—"

"Hush," Rachel said. "Hush. We'll stop each other."

Don groped for her hand. She held it, feeling the scrawny wrist bones and the blood in his pulse and the callus on the third finger where he held a pencil. Her fingernails dug into the bony knobs of his knuckles. She could feel there, in the veins and nerves and delicate bones of his hands, the question he hadn't yet asked, and she waited.

"The night in the metaphor," he said, finally, "the Night. Death. Is it really as beautiful as I felt? As desirable?"

"Oh, God, Don. How do I know? The only other one who has

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seen it is you, and you were linked with me. How can I tell if it's really that beautiful, or if it's just that I—that *we* need it to be like that?"

Don's hand tightened on hers. Rachel gripped it hard, grateful for the blood and bone and flesh next to her palm.

"We'll stop each other," Don said. "Rachel?"

She nodded. Unsmiling, they looked at each other. Both were careful to keep their eyes focused, to stare straight ahead at the other's face, to avert their heads from the parted yellow drapes fluttering at the sill, from what lay beyond the yellow drapes.

Their two hands clasped desperately. For dear life.

Outside the window, night came. ●

IAsfm Puzzle #14

From page 25

SOLUTION TO LUNACY

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ON BOOKS

Lyonesse
By Jack Vance
Berkley, $6.95 (paper)

In one of those epic MGM musicals of the 1940s, the finale featured that long-legged goddess of the dance, Cyd Charisse, leaping and pirouetting through what seems an infinite amount of multi-colored detergent foam, piled in room-high heaps. I feel something like the lady must have felt after that day's shooting; I've just finished Jack Vance's *Lyonesse* (he says, wiping the magenta suds out of his eyes).

Many people seem to regard Vance as a writer of fantasy. He isn't, really; almost all of his stories take place on rational, science-fictional worlds in a widely-populated galaxy of the future. (I use the word rational as opposed to magical, and not necessarily as a synonym for sensible.) But technology isn't exactly uppermost, and Vance's fanciful aliens, giddy cultures, colorful settings (literally—the man knows more colors than Helena Rubenstein), and fairy-tale plots often disguise the SF aspects.

It's science fiction given the trappings of fantasy, which might account for his great popularity in the past decade, though he's been around for quite a while. Because he's been so prominent lately, one tends to forget that he is one of the few authors left who got his start in the classic, pre-1950 pulp magazines. But until quite recently, he was perhaps the only writer who gave us science fiction in the style of fantasy; in a way, the best of both worlds. It was the tension between the style and content that gave Vance's work its special quality.

But *Lyonesse* is a fantasy. It takes place in the Elder Isles (Avallon, Ys, Lyonesse, Hybras, aka Hy Brasill, *et al.*) which lay across the Bay of Biscay from Gaul to the south of Britain. These are divided into ten squabbling kingdoms, and are populated by a mixed bag of humans, trolls, ogres, and an enormous variety of fairy folk. Magical powers range from nil in most humans to vast in the magicians of mixed human/fairy blood, and can be acquired through study (as with the magicians) or inherent (as in the

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fairies). The period is that of Arthur's grandfather, though the action of the novel stretches across quite a few years. (And, thank goodness, that's all you hear about Arthur—that an exiled king of the Elder Isles sired Uther Pendragon.)

And there lies the problem—here is Vance's extravagant, fantastical style at the service of an extravagant, fantastical fantasy. What a farrago results! What a mass of characters, places, races, events are thrown at the reader! This, so far as I know, is Vance's longest work (well over 400 pages), and he carries it through at a dizzying pace; if he were a film director, no scene in his films would last more than a minute—then it would be off to a new set and, like as not, a new group of characters. Unanchored, even as tenuously as his SF has been, to a universe of reality, all this seems to have the consistency of bubbly champagne.

The plot, which needless to say proceeds in fits, starts, and overlapping convolutions, has to do with the life (from birth) of the unhappy Princess Suldrun of Lyonesse, whose father wishes to marry her off for reasons of state. She refuses a perfectly suitable (by his lights) choice and is confined to a garden by the sea. Guess who gets pushed overboard from a passing vessel by a jealous relative? A handsome young prince, that's who. In fact, it's Prince Aillas of Troicinet, with which Lyonesse is currently at war. After enough time has elapsed for the inevitable, he is imprisoned by Suldrun's father; after her child is born, Suldrun does away with herself.

The second portion of the book is concerned with the efforts of the escaped Aillas to find his son; typical of the giddy plot devices, the baby has ended up in a fairy community and has grown into a lad of nine or ten years of age in the year his father has been imprisoned. Counterpointing all this is the conflict between the magicians Murgen and Tamurello, extended through Shimrod, Murgen's *alter ego* but nonetheless a separate personality, and Carfilhiot, who is a sort of avatar of the female magician Desmei, all of whom are involved in one way or another with the story of Suldrun and Aillas (it was Carfilhiot, for instance, whom Suldrun's father wanted her to marry). Are you following all this?

Add a magic mirror, a colony of children kept for food by an ogre, a witch with chicken feet, various merpeople, a meddling Christian priest, trolls who live under bridges, a changeling princess, several Druids, a few dryads, a two-headed imp in a bottle, and an ornithomaniac

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king, and you have only a tithe of the ingredients in this stew.

Much of it is a lot of fun, certainly. I particularly liked the escape of the children, including Suldrun's near-adolescent infant son, from the ogre Arbogast, and Shimrod's venture into a strange realm of sentient mountains. The continuous invention is staggering, and there is an odd satisfaction in the fact that most of the characters, despite the dizzy people, places, and things they encounter, act with a certain sensibility and intelligence (another sustained quality in Vance's stories).

But it all does seem to be too much of a muchness; the reader ends up struggling in an Olympic-sized bubble bath.

Against Infinity
By Gregory Benford
Timescape, $14.95

The setting for Gregory Benford's new novel, *Against Infinity* (which is one of those wretched, characterless titles that can really work against a book) is Ganymede, Jupiter's moon and the largest satellite in the Solar System. The time is not so much the near future as, let's say, the foreseeable future.

Here Benford has created a background for his story that is absolutely amazing. It is a culture just barely past the pioneering stage, living and working on Ganymede while the world is literally being remade around it. Land and air are being refashioned, in myriad ways, to enable man, eventually, to live there freely. Living creatures are engineered in laboratories as self-propogating agents that will, by what they ingest and excrete, change the entire ecosphere.

Humanity still lives in contained quarters and moves in contained suits, but, aided by "servo'd" animals, remade and with augmented intelligence, already mines and reaps.

This Ganymede is so complex—technologically, socially, economically—that it is useless to even try to do it justice in a short review. Many years ago, I remember getting an intellectual high from a brilliantly extrapolated pioneering culture, also, curiously enough, set on Ganymede. "Yes," one thinks. "Yes, that's the way it's *got* to be." That was in Robert Heinlein's *Farmer In the Sky*; for its time, it was an extraordinary achievement. Multiply that by the various advances made in the three decades since its publication, and you have the current extraordinary achievement of *Against Infinity*.

In this triumphantly realized setting, Benford has set a comparatively simple story. It is the "maturing boy hunting an elusive prey" story: the boy is Manuel Lopez, Ganymede-born;

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the prey is Aleph, which is less easily explained. It has apparently been on Ganymede for eons longer than humanity, possibly left by the aliens of whom other traces have been found. It is huge and perhaps a machine, perhaps part biological; it seems to be oblivious to humanity but sometimes obliquely interested in it; it has caused immense damage and sometimes death, but only by its bulk and disinterested carelessness; it is seemingly indestructable. The novel chronicles Manuel's pursuit of Aleph, which extends through his adolescence, the culmination of the years-long chase, and what happens after.

Somehow I kept thinking of Hemingway (which is not necessarily positive thinking, I must immediately note). This is sort of *The Old Man and the Sea* as *The Young Man and the Thing*, and the impression is heightened by such sentences as "He tasted the coppery scent in his nostrils and knew it and was no longer afraid of that itself." There is a mystical, cosmic quality to this hunt, the kind of thing with which Hemingway imbued his hunting stories. Certainly Aleph *is* literally more cosmic than Hemingway's poor, put-upon lions and rhinoceroses; it actually has to do with the mutability of cosmic law, but the difference may be in quantity and not in kind.

Perhaps Benford's richly textured backdrop cries for a more richly textured story to match it and emerge from it, rather than this simpler narrative that seems almost partially imposed on it. But it, itself, is such an achievement that I think the author could have set a Nancy Drew mystery in it, and I'd still have read it with immense pleasure.

Tea With the Black Dragon
By R.A. MacAvoy
Bantam, $2.75 (paper)

This one is a real oddity, and the reviewer is faced with a most curious problem with it. There is, essentially, only one element of fantasy in it and that is one which the conscientious critic should not mention, since it is a fact withheld from the reader until the end of the book. (That's discounting the copy on the cover, which gives away the whole thing. Publishers!) So anything that *can* be said about it will only make it sound like a novel of intrigue and computer-espionage, albeit an odd one.

There is also the other odd aspect of it, which is that it begins with the person whom we think will be the protagonist—in this case, a charming, middle-aged lady of some eccentricity—meeting a mysterious stranger. Usually in this sort of situation, who and what the stranger turns out to be usually also turns out

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to have a good deal to do with what the story is about. Here, after a few pages, we realize with some surprise that the mysterious stranger—a no-longer-young Oriental gentleman—*is* the protagonist, mysteries and all, and that he is a total outsider to the whole situation.

Martha Macnamara has received an urgent summons from her daughter Elizabeth, with whom she has a stormy relationship, to come to San Francisco, where Elizabeth works as a high-level computer programmer. Martha has no current address for Elizabeth, and waits at the posh hotel where reservations have been made for her, for Elizabeth to get in touch. While waiting, she meets a Chinese, incongruously named Mayland Long, with whom she feels great empathy. There is no word from Elizabeth, and the two go in search of her, eventually learning that she has become involved in a highly dangerous computer fraud scheme with some highly dangerous accomplices. Martha is then kidnapped, and Mayland is left to rescue all concerned, which he sets out to do, showing some rather unusual attributes along the way.

So far, it's something like a more literate episode of a private eye TV show, sort of "Magnum, Ph. D." since the characters discuss things such as zen and Bach and Thomas Rhymer. And they, aside from being intelligent, knowledgeable, and likable, are so quirky that one goes right along with the detective story with great enjoyment.

And even if we are given enough clues and hints to know who and what Mayland Long really is, and the ending is hardly a slam bang surprise, the author reveals it when and as she (?) wants to; I'm not going to be the one to spoil it. All that can honorably be done is to say that this is a most odd and engaging little fantasy with very little fantasy in it but which, nevertheless, the reader with a taste for the offbeat can well take a chance on.

For Love Of Mother-Not
By Alan Dean Foster
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

Alan Dean Foster's stories of Flinx and Pip in the Commonwealth have been very popular over the past decade. (In our continuing effort to be of service, the four earlier Flinx and Pip novels are *The Tar-Aiym Krang, Orphan Star, Bloodhype,* and *The End of the Matter.*) The latest one, *For Love Of Mother-Not* (another title I could do without—have all the good titles been used?), will probably please those with whom the series has been popular, since it backtracks to chronicle Flinx's early years and his meeting

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with Pip. For those not in the know, Flinx is a stalwart young man with empathic powers; Pip is a minidrag—no, not a midget transvestite, but a serpentine creature with functional pink and blue wings that is mentally symbiotic with Flinx; and the Commonwealth is the inhabited worlds of the Galaxy, so far as I can gather (Foster assumes prior knowledge for some important matters here).

The child Flinx is bought at a slave market on the world Moth by Mother Mastiff, an elderly woman of a type we have met before—she owns a down-at-the-heels curio shop and has a dubious past, a foul mouth, the wisdom of the ages and a heart of gold. He is raised in the seething, but good-heartedly picturesque slums of Drallar, the major city of Moth, and his powers of telepathic empathy come out erratically. He finds Pip, a native of a far-distant world, in a trash heap (?) and, by golly, Pip is an enhancer of telepathic, empathetic powers. (Engagingly enough, the first thing that Pip does on meeting Flinx is to go to sleep—at this point, everything was so familiar that I empathized totally and nearly did, too.) Now it seems that Flinx is one of the products of the experiments of a group of calculating scientists, whose work in genetic engineering has been outlawed by the Commonwealth. *They* want to recontrol Flinx and kidnap Mother Mastiff in order to do so; F&P take off after them to the wilder portions of Moth; everybody's being chased by some sort of Commonwealth Feds. Flinx rescues Mother-Not, we come full circle back to Drallar, and then *Pip* is kidnapped. . . .

As I say, fans of the earlier books might well enjoy themselves.

Earth's Last Citadel
By C.L. Moore & Henry Kuttner
Ace, $2.25 (paper)

From the Golden Age, this short novel (there were few *long* novels in those days of magazine brevity) is a gem of science fantasy, a wonderful example of that earlier period when the two subgenres were closer together and high tech and low sociology were not the major preoccupations of SF. (The cycle is turning again, thank goodness; the real world has become so science fictional that the *avant garde* is returning to fantasy.)

C.L. Moore and Henry Kuttner were at the time (the 1940s) husband-and-wife writers of the pulps (brought together, legend has it, by the unlikely agency of H.P. Lovecraft); both were brilliant, and they wrote reams under their own names, their combined names, each other's names, and a confusing host of pseudonyms. *Earth's Last Cit-*

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adel is a high point of their careers.

Four humans, involved in a minor skirmish during WW II, are taken aboard a golden bubble of a ship, in which they lie dormant for unimaginable ages. The Earth is near dead when they revive, and they become involved with the strange inhabitants of the moribund world. For ages, it had been dominated by the Light-Wearers, an invading race of beings of pure energy who had eliminated mankind except for strains bred as pets, workers, and food. The Light-Wearers are gone, now (save for one, trapped in the golden bubble with our heroes —it is loose, and hungry); their creatures live on in the exotic environments they left behind.

C.L. Moore, particularly, had a talent for conjuring strange and beautiful beings and places; her hand is evident in the description of the underground city of Carcasilla, and its floating tower of Flande, supported only by a spiral of flowing water. Here are wonderful visions, cavalierly based on the thinnest of scientific speculation, and excused by the simplest of action/adventure plots. This sort of thing went out of fashion mid-century, but we have learned since then that there are more things that are dreamt of than can be delimited by our narrow view of science and the universe.

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, %The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10014.●

NEXT ISSUE

The October 1983 issue of *IAsfm* will mark Vonda McIntyre's first-ever appearance in our pages. Her cover story, "Transit" takes place in the same universe, and uses some of the same characters as her classic "Aztecs," nominated for both a Hugo and a Nebula in 1978. The rest of the issue isn't set as yet, but we do have stories in stock by Pamela Sargent, John Kessel, Leigh Kennedy, Gardner Dozois and Jack Dann, and Tanith Lee. Not *all* of those will be in October, but *some* will! On sale August 30.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Not so many con(vention)s now, in deference to the WorldCon, so we'll look ahead to Fall and next year. Make plans now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273–6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send a #10 SASE when writing cons. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me under the Filthy Pierre badge.

AUGUST, 1983

5–7—***StarCall.*** *For info, write:* **225 Church, Vienna VA 22180.** *Or phone:* **(703) 281–2711** *(10 am to 10 pm only, not collect).* Con will be held in: Westpark Hotel, Rosslyn VA (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Gordon R. (Dorsai) Dickson. This con's date, place, guests have changed frequently—call ahead to confirm.

SEPTEMBER, 1983

1–5—**ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203.** John (Zanzibar) Brunner, David (Lensman) Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. 1983 WorldCon. Convention Center. Join at the door for over $40.

OCTOBER, 1983

7–9—**NonCon, Box 475, Sta. G, Calgary Alta. T3A 2G4.** O. Scott Card. The Great White North lives.

7–10—**EarthCon, Box 22041, Beachwood OH 44122. (216) 351–1663, (313) 471–6932.** Cleveland OH. Jacqueline (Zeor) Lichtenberg. Medievalists, masquerade, banquet.

28–30—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569.** Tampa FL. Piers Anthony, Robert (Horseclans) Adams, fans Bill Ritch & Ken Mitchroney. Alien cooking lessons, masquerade, trivia quiz.

28–30—**World Fantasy Con, Box 423, Oak Forest IL 60452.** Chicago IL. Gene (New Sun) Wolfe, Robert ("Psycho") Bloch, Manly Wade Wellman, artist Rowena Morrill. The WorldCon for fantasy fans. Theme: "60 Years of 'Weird Tales,' " the Chicago-based pulp magazine of fond memory. Emphasis is on dark fantasy (horror, sword-&-sorcery, etc.). Join at the door for $35.

NOVEMBER 1983

11–13—**OryCon, Box 14727, Portland OR 97214. (503) 283–0802.** Octavia Butler. At Hilton Hotel.

JANUARY, 1984

13–15—**Brave New Con, Box 5818, Silver Spring MD 20814.** Reston VA (near Washington DC). Theme: "Orwell's '1984' " (yes, they know they named the con after the wrong author's work).

AUGUST, 1984

30–Sep. 3—**LACon 2, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. '84 WorldCon. Membership $40.

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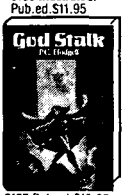

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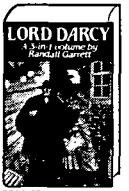

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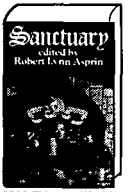

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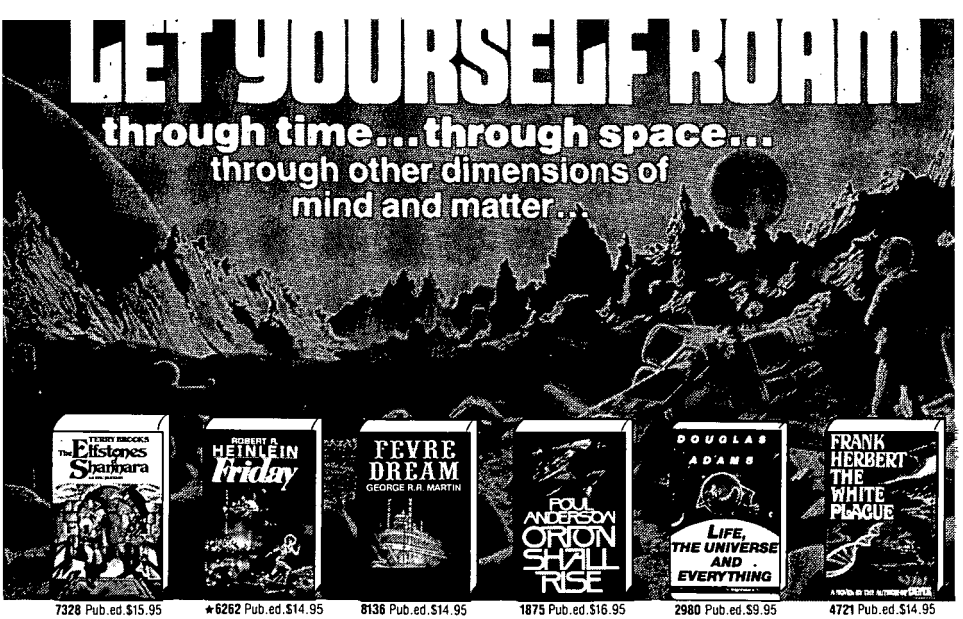

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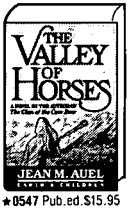

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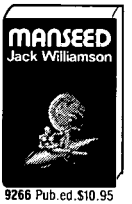

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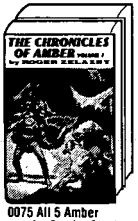

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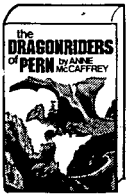

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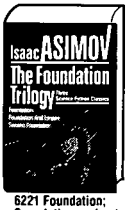

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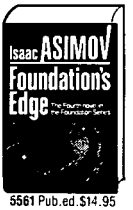

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